ISSUE 406
EMPIRE OCTOBER 2022

BLONDE ANA DE ARMAS IS MARILYN MONROE

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KNIVES OUT IS BACK!

DANIEL CRAIG'S SUPER-SLEUTH RETURNS IN GLASS ONION

Plus RIAN JOHNSON REVISITS *THE LAST JEDI*

GLASS ONION: A KNIVES OUT MYSTERY • BLONDE • GANGS OF LONDON • BROS • PAM GRIER

"Chew on this onion, yeah?"

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AS THIS YEAR'S brain-meltingly hot summer fades away (was it just me or did it feel like we'd been beamed into the climax of *Sunshine*?), winter approaches, and with it all its cosy seasonal joys. Mugs of hot chocolate, scarf-wrapped walks in the park, and films where people get horribly slaughtered in the first act. Yes, nothing says "the holidays are coming" quite like a murder-mystery, that classic genre that mixes up sparkling dialogue with guns, poisons and assorted stabby objects. Which is why we're very excited indeed to take you to the scene of the crime for *Glass Onion: A Knives Out Mystery*.

What exactly does that title mean? It's a mystery. But what we do know is that we're in for a treat; director Rian Johnson and star Daniel Craig are reuniting for a follow-up to 2019's instant classic, *Knives Out*, and bringing with them a panoply of guest stars/murder suspects. For our world-exclusive cover story, Hanna Flint does her best Benoit Blanc, interrogating them all to peel back the layers of this tantalising *Onion*. The game is afoot from page 50.

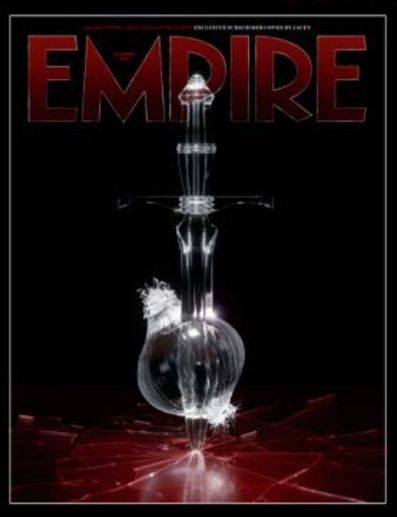
And that very nice Rian Johnson was happy to stick around, opening up his personal vault to share candid photos he's taken on his sets, from *Looper* to *Breaking Bad*, and revisiting his much-chattered-about *Star Wars* movie, *The Last Jedi*, now five years old. Yes, it's Porgs out. Other issue highlights: the full story of Marilyn Monroe biopic *Blonde*, a tribute to Nichelle Nichols by Zoe Saldaña, and a round-up of all the latest Bat-happenings to rock Gotham.

Happy reading.



NICK DE SEMLYEN
EDITOR
@nickdesemlyen

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Marco Vittur

EMPIRE

WHAT WE'VE BEEN UP TO THIS MONTH

CHATTING TO RIAN JOHNSON FOR THE *KNIVES OUT* SEQUEL



Glass Onion: A Knives Out Mystery is our cover feature, and writer-director Rian Johnson spoke to *Empire* contributor Hanna Flint over Zoom about Benoit Blanc's latest case. This is indeed a twisted web — to finish untangling it, skip ahead and read the feature.

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Chris Hewitt, James Dyer and Helen O'Hara took home the gold (or rather, red) at this year's British Podcast Awards, winning Best Live Podcast for our 500th episode spectacular. Listen to the winning episode wherever podcasts are found.

HEADING BACK TO JURASSIC WORLD



Deputy Online Editor Ben Travis headed to Isla Nublar (aka Malta) to get chased by raptors, and in the process found time to chat with *Jurassic World Dominion* stars Bryce Dallas Howard and DeWanda Wise. Listen out for the podcast interview soon.

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Funko

EXCLUSIVE POP!







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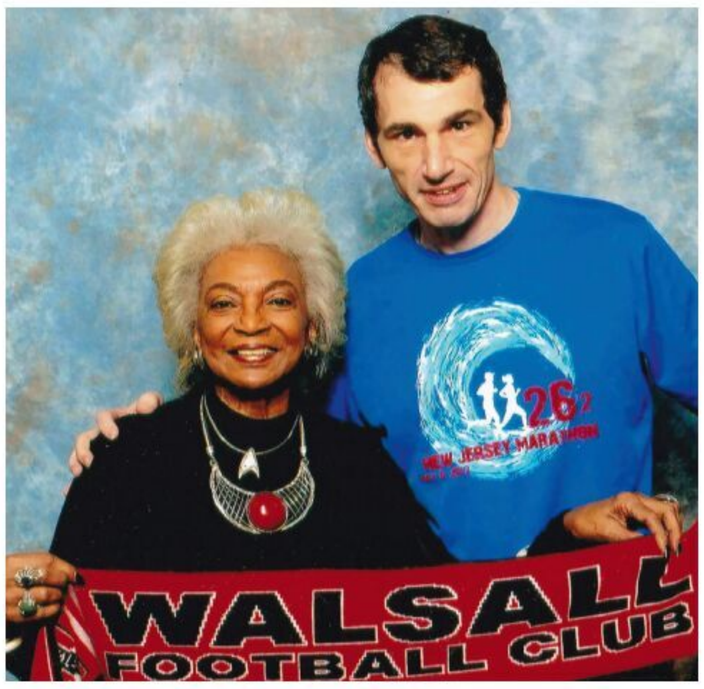
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TALK TO US



COMMENT OF THE MONTH

TO BOLDLY GO...

The news that *Star Trek's* Nichelle Nichols passed away was so sad. She played an important role in the 1960s and was praised by Martin Luther King. We all know about the kiss with Kirk, but Nichelle was much more than that. I was so pleased when I got to meet her on a visit to this country some years ago — and I managed to turn her into a Walsall FC supporter just for a moment!

MARK DABBS, GREAT WYRLEY

Thank you, Mark. For your heartfelt tribute — and the surprising revelation that one of sci-fi's biggest stars was an unlikely League Two football fan — have a Picturehouse membership on us.

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TOO SCOTT TO HANDLE

It really is great to see my old mucker Scott Adkins getting the column inches that he's worked so flipping hard for! I say "old mucker" — he was more of a co-star, really. I say "co-star" — I was an extra on *Green Street Hooligans: Underground* and never said a word to him but, boy, was he good at kicking heads. I always knew you'd blow up, Scotty boy! Don't forget me when you go stratospheric!

CHARLES JOHNSON, VIA EMAIL

Scott Adkins' co-stars over the years include Jackie Chan, Jean-Claude Van Damme, Dolph Lundgren and Keanu Reeves — but rest assured, he'll never forget his inestimable scene partner Charles Johnson as 'Bloke In The Background He Never Interacted With'.

ON JASON ISAACS PLAYING CARY GRANT: OUR FAVOURITE CHILD-KIDNAPPING, FIRE-BENDING, CHURCH-BURNING, JEDI-EXTERMINATING, DEATH-EATING MANIAC IS GONNA PLAY THE EVER-LOVEABLE CARY GRANT? I'M SHOCKED NOBODY THOUGHT OF IT SOONER.

VINCE RAINELLI

***EVENT HORIZON* IS ON NETFLIX. I'VE NEVER SEEN IT BEFORE, BUT I'VE ALWAYS WANTED TO. IF ONLY SO I MIGHT FINALLY UNDERSTAND ALL THE REFERENCES ON THE @EMPIREMAGAZINE PODCAST.**

@AULDGRUMPYTITS

BATGIRL, INTERRUPTED

I'm still trying to wrap my head around the cancelling of *Batgirl*! Surely the negative press of a bad film is far better than the reaction that they've had not releasing it? It also would have made some money back! Or is it all a marketing ploy, and they'll release it now that it's got so much media coverage?

WILL POYSER, VIA EMAIL

Honestly, Will? We're still trying to wrap our heads around it, too. Follow the Bat-signal to page 10, where we try to unpack one of the maddest movie stories in recent memory.

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"I'm going to leave now and put a fan on me noo-noo"

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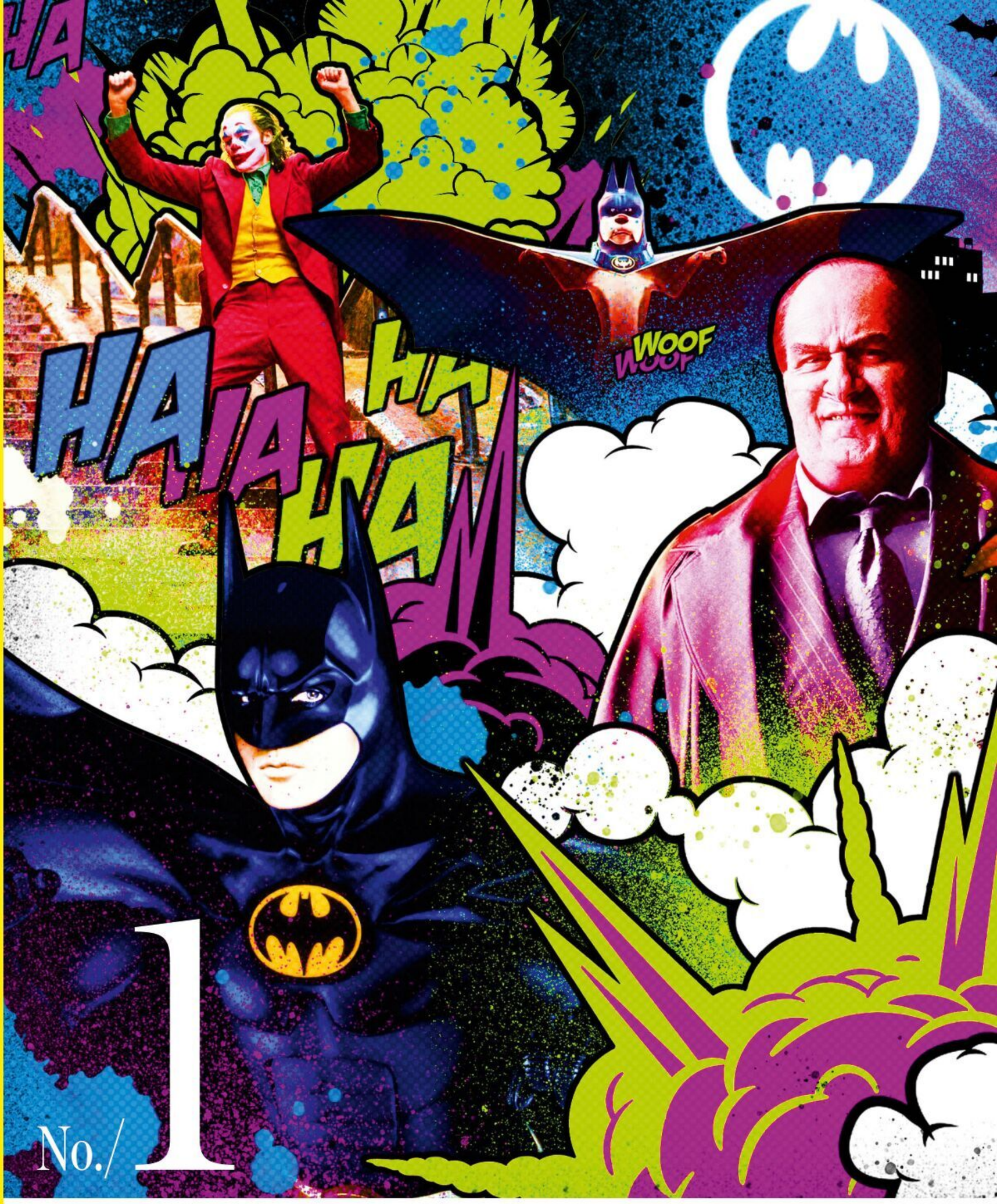
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FACT FILE

THIS MONTH'S FILM MOMENTS THAT MATTER [EDITED BY BETH WEBB]



No./ 1

Chaos in Gotham!

With Bat-people popping up everywhere, we lay out the latest happenings in the world of the Caped Crusader

KEATON. AFFLECK. PATTINSON. Reeves (Matt). Reeves (Keanu). It's a demanding time to be a Batman fan — to keep track of everything going on requires a regularly updated Bat-planner. These days, including TV and big-screen animation, there are a possible six Batmen in play (not to mention a Batdog). Adding to the potential confusion is the recent merger of Warner Bros. with reality-based streaming giant Discovery, prompting a slew of cancelled projects and the announcement of a new ten-year plan for the DC Universe. So what exactly is going on? We attempt to unravel this Riddler-level mystery...

BATGIRL IS CANCELLED

The 95-per-cent finished film starring Leslie Grace, DC's first Afro-Latina lead, as vigilante Barbara Gordon, and directed by *Ms. Marvel* favourites Bilall Fallah and Adil El Arbi, has been permanently shelved, to shock and horror from fans. Industry analysts have speculated that Warner Bros. Discovery may have made the decision in order to get a tax write-off for the film's $90 million budget, not wanting to either release it on streaming service HBO Max or put it out in cinemas. "We're not going to put a movie out unless we believe in it," said new CEO David Zaslav, but it's not clear why he doesn't believe in

Illustration: Mike Cathro



this hero enough to, say, boost the action scenes and release it on the big screen.

KEATON VS AFFLECK?

Caught up in the *Batgirl* cancellation is Michael Keaton's Batman, who was due to appear as a mentor to Barbara as well as appearing in the multiversal madness of *The Flash* next summer, after 30 years away from the role. There, he'll also be joined by Ben Affleck, back in the Batsuit for what he has called "a really nice finish on my experience with that character" after 2017's *Justice League*. But it's Affleck who's now due to be seen in 2023's *Aquaman* sequel rather than the rumoured Keaton appearance there, while *Batgirl* is a goner. Does this mean it's Bat-fleck as the universe's main Batman going forward? There's no confirmation yet.

THE BATMAN RETURNS?

If Affleck *is* back, he may not be the only Batman around. The Robert Pattinson-starring, definite-article-boasting, Matt Reeves-directed 2021 film was conceived as a trilogy, separate from any shared DC Universe (the *Justice League*-based Snyder-verse was very much a going concern when it began). As of yet there's no official start date for its sequel, but Zaslav has cited the film as the kind of hit he wants to see more of, so the signs are good. It seems unlikely, however, that Pattinson's emo Batman will merrily cross over to other franchises, so this may stand alone on the big screen...

P-P-P-PICK UP A PENGUIN

... but not the small screen. Reeves pitched several TV spin-offs to *The Batman*. One, a Gotham PD police procedural, has already been cancelled by HBO Max, who were reportedly nervous about the optics of putting a corrupt cop front and centre. The *Penguin* spin-off, however, starring Colin Farrell and a metric ton of latex, is still said to be moving forwards because everyone's fine with a corrupt gangster, and will be out before we see a sequel to Pattinson's film.

THE JOKER'S ON US

Send in the clowns, again. It's no surprise that a sequel to the billion-dollar, Oscar-winning, non-canon origin story of Batman's nemesis is happening. What *is* a surprise is that *Joker: Folie À Deux* is reportedly a musical, with Lady Gaga said to be playing Harley Quinn opposite Joaquin Phoenix's Joker. Judging by the production-announcement video that Gaga released, returning director Todd Phillips may deliver a pastiche of classic musical numbers, but we won't know until 2024, with filming due to start in December. Going by the original film, expect to see an appearance by Bruce Wayne in his early teens.

BAT... DOG?

And all that is just live-action. In the realm of animation, the recent DC *League Of Super-Pets* film — spoiler! — left its Keanu Reeves-voiced Batman with a Kevin Hart-voiced bulldog and seemed to hint at a possible spin-off, as well as setting up sequels of its own. So why not a new animated Batman and his Bat-pet on the big screen? Well, Zaslav disapprovingly described 'Kids & Animation' as an area with "uncertain financial returns" in a recent shareholder call, so don't buy any Bat-treats just yet. **HELEN O'HARA**



No./2

How to make a killer ending

David Gordon Green explains how he's wrapping up his grisly Michael Myers trilogy with HALLOWEEN ENDS

THERE'S NO POINT asking David Gordon Green how *Halloween Ends* ends, because even he doesn't know. "It changes every day," he says from his office in LA. "In theory, the picture is locked, but this morning I called the editor and said, 'What if we do this one thing...'"

It's understandable that the writer-director is fussing over how to close his trilogy. It's not just the ending of *his* story; it's also the conclusion to the story John Carpenter began in 1978, and of Jamie Lee Curtis' time playing Laurie Strode. "I speak with John and Jamie Lee Curtis regularly about it," says Green. "It's exciting, uncertain, satisfying and sad. I've enjoyed the ride but it's probably time to get off. I think we're gonna go out with a bang."

Ending a horror series is a tricky thing. Monsters never stay dead for long. Green says it is "inevitable" *Halloween* will continue in some form, but he can only concentrate on his own ending. "There have been a lot of slasher movies since 1978 and I want this to be different from all of those. I want this to be something people don't get in rip-offs or reboots or even in my [other *Halloween* films]." The last movie, *Halloween Kills*, was an ultra-violent onslaught that put Michael at the centre. This one puts the focus back on Laurie. It's four years after *Kills*, and Michael's murder of Laurie's daughter Karen (Judy Greer). She's supposedly moved on, but a new murder leads to one last clash with Michael. "If our second film was free-for-all, violent chaos, this is a more intimate, atmospheric conclusion."

The details of that conclusion Green wants to keep under wraps, but he says, cryptically, there were three films he re-watched before making *Ends*: John Carpenter's *Christine*; *Butcher, Baker, Nightmare Maker* (a 1981 horror about a woman who kills anyone who comes near her 'nephew', who's really her son); and *My Bodyguard* (a 1980 comedy about standing up to school bullies). "There are a lot of thematic similarities with *Christine*," says Green. Both are about killers "without motive". The other two, he says, "are movies that affected me a lot as a kid. What I took emotionally from them, I'm trying to translate into a new form." One might also note that both see an innocent become as violent as their aggressor...

Even when *Halloween* inevitably rises again, Green can at least be fairly certain he's the last person to direct Curtis in her most iconic role. "She said that. We've got to hold her to that!" Although in horror, you never say never. **OLLY RICHARDS**

***HALLOWEEN ENDS* IS IN CINEMAS FROM 14 OCTOBER**



Above: Oh, that Michael Myers is at it again, the troublesome scamp. **Left:** Jamie Lee Curtis in her final appearance (or so we're told) as final girl Laurie Strode.



BLACK IN FOCUS

AMON WARMANN chews over the main moment in Black film and TV this month

IDRIS ELBA IS HAVING HIS MOST ELECTRIC, ECLECTIC YEAR YET



As you wish: Idris Elba further flexes his acting muscles as the Djinn, alongside Tilda Swinton, in George Miller's *Three Thousand Years Of Longing*.

THERE'S AN OLD Idris Elba clip that recirculates online every now and then that I always enjoy watching. It sees the then-23-year-old Brit, who was just starting out, reacting to Pierce Brosnan's performance in *GoldenEye*: "He's really good. He's got all the charm. He's got all the looks... He's alright." Despite being on many fans' wishlists, an Elba-starring Bond hasn't yet materialised. But given the year this East London-born movie star is having, who needs 007 credentials? Whether he's a widower fighting a lion with his bare hands in *Beast*, playing a pointy-eared djinn in *Three Thousand Years Of Longing*, or returning to his roots in a *Luther* movie potentially later this year, 2022 has shown his versatility knows no bounds.

Baltasar Kormákur's high-octane *Beast* is a movie with a simple selling point: Elba versus a bloodthirsty lion, who poses an immediate threat to his daughters. That pared-down premise is all that's needed to get people hyped. A family man throwing punches at a lion while on a trip to South Africa to honour his dead wife and reconnect with said daughters? Sold.

Three Thousand Years Of Longing — a fantasy epic from George Miller — sees Elba as a tall, toned, vulnerable djinn, who regales Tilda Swinton's cautious academic with his life story, full of lost love, sultans and betrayal. It's a rare romantic role for Elba, whose character goes beyond his djinn duties to fulfil the desires of the women he meets. Then, following this eccentric love story, he will be reviving his roguish, grey-overcoated DCI John Luther, as the beloved BBC crime-drama show gets the big-screen treatment. The film has already been shot and is rumoured for release later this year.

There's nobody working today like Elba, who can pivot with such ease to a gritty, home-grown drama from an effects-laden spectaclar. Speaking of the latter, even though his character Heimdall has been criminally underused in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, his cameo in a *Thor: Love And Thunder* post-credits scene still inspired cheers from audiences, proving the impact he can make with even only a few seconds of screen time.

It's not often you can say an actor is still full of surprises 28 years into their career. Yet Elba is at the peak of his powers. Simply put, he's got all the charm, he's got all the looks... He's alright.

CLASSIC PICK OF THE MONTH

WIDOWS (2018)

Four widows unite to pull off a heist planned by their dead husbands in Steve McQueen's gripping crime thriller. Come for the incredible performances by a powerhouse ensemble, including Viola Davis and Daniel Kaluuya. Stay for the complex power struggles between criminals, civilians and elected officials.



No./3 HUNGER GAMES' NEW PLAYERS

MEET THE MAJOR CHARACTERS IN DYSTOPIAN PREQUEL *THE BALLAD OF SONGBIRDS AND SNAKES*



LUCY GRAY BAIRD
RACHEL ZEGLER

Zegler will play *The Ballad Of Songbirds And Snakes*' female lead, described by director Francis Lawrence as "the anti-Katniss". A tribute for the tenth annual Hunger Games (set 64 years before the original film), Lucy is mentored by an 18-year-old President Coriolanus Snow (Tom Blyth), here an impoverished orphan hoping to reinvigorate his family's status.

DR VOLUMNIA GAUL
VIOLA DAVIS

The film's major villain, Davis is the head of these Hunger Games, tasked with taking the most brutal elements of human nature and turning them into sport.

CASCA HIGHBOTTOM
PETER DINKLAGE

The founder of the Hunger Games and Dean of the Academy, the prestigious high school belonging to privileged city the Capitol, Highbottom is the definition of a wrong'un. Described as "austere and vindictive" by Lawrence, this will see Dinklage make a drastic departure from his days as *Game Of Thrones*' tipsy moral compass.

TIGRIS SNOW
HUNTER SCHAFER

Euphoria breakout Schafer will play cousin, confidante and advisor to Coriolanus. She also works as a Capitol stylist, an early career that will carry her into the later *Hunger Games* story, where she has cosmetically transformed her face into a tiger's. As you do. **BETH WEBB**

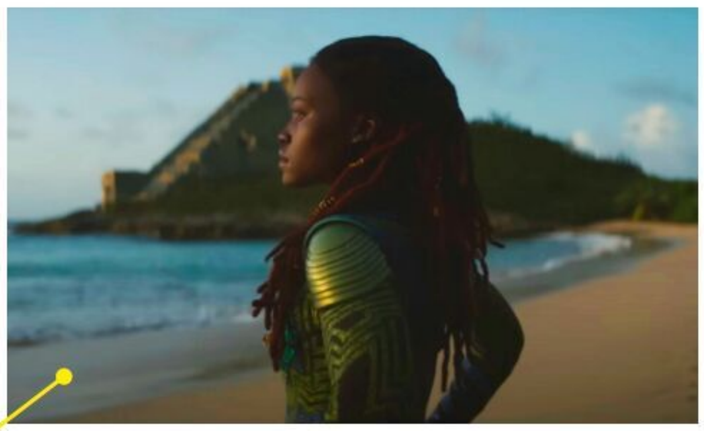
***HUNGER GAMES: THE BALLAD OF SONGBIRDS AND SNAKES* IS IN CINEMAS FROM 17 NOVEMBER 2023**

Getty Images, Marco Vittur

TRAILER TALK

Black Panther: Wakanda Forever

Unfiltered, uncensored, uncompromising trailer reactions from team EMPIRE













Joanna Moran (Photography Director): I hope they supply boxes of tissues at this screening. Had they filmed anything with Chadwick on this film?

Ben Travis (Deputy Online Editor): I don't think they'd shot anything, but they had planned out what it was going to be.

John Nugent (Reviews Editor): It's such a tricky thing to navigate. But Ryan Coogler is as safe a pair of hands as you can get.

Beth Webb (News Editor): This opening shot already says so much.

John: It's lovely that they're making a lot of use of real locations, like Chloé Zhao did with *Eternals*. As much as I love the first film, I think that they used a lot of greenscreen. This feels really grounded, with beautiful cinematography.

Ben: So many mixed emotions here. On the one hand, it's so exciting to be back in Wakanda; it's been such a long time. But it's frayed with loss. There's going to be a heaviness when watching it.

Beth: I love that they've gone even bigger with the costumes in this film. Ruth E. Carter is such a force.

Joanna: You've got that mix of traditional and contemporary. I mean, they're not Yeezys, but there are some modern sandals in there alongside more traditional garments. And the same goes for the architecture.

Mike Cathro (Deputy Art Director): To go back to what John was saying, everything just looks so real. It's great to see in a Marvel film.

Sophie Butcher (Social Media Editor): That's why *Eternals* is my number-two Marvel film.

John: Booooo!

Beth: There's absolutely no heckling in the Trailer Talk space, please.

John: Booooo!

Beth: Cool off.

Sophie: So this is Namor territory, right?

Joanna: How does he fit into this?

Ben: He's a submariner. I think in the comics he's a mutant. He can breathe underwater, and according to Chris Hewitt, he's a bit of a prick.

John: He's Aquaman but Marvel, right? In the comics, he's supposedly the first mutant. There's been speculation that this could be the introduction to X-Men.

Beth: I hope they don't use this film to establish too many other elements of the franchise, like in *Doctor Strange In the Multiverse Of Madness*. That would be a real shame.

John: This look is giving *Drag Race*, isn't it?

Joanna: Yes, it's very ballroom, with that giant disco ball. It looks like he should be in *Pose* dancing to Donna Summer.

Sophie: "The category is: MCU."

John: The blending of the music is some of the best I've heard in years.

Ben: It's ridiculously good. You've got 'No Woman, No Cry', in reference to the women of Wakanda and the friends lost along the way, and then Kendrick Lamar's 'Alright', which is this protest anthem. I listened to an interview with the guy who cut this trailer, and apparently the request for 'No Woman, No Cry' came from Ryan Coogler directly.

Sophie: Here's Riri Williams, who's Ironheart. She's a genius techie as well, right?

Ben: We don't know exactly how this is going to work, but maybe Riri could be someone who's come through Shuri's science outreach stuff and been brought to Wakanda.

John: I interviewed Dominique Thorne straight after she was cast, and apparently she didn't even audition. They just gave her the role.

Beth: That's quite a vote of confidence.

Ben: It certainly seems like T'Challa is deceased in the Marvel universe. They sort of did that with Iron Man, where you could still feel his presence through art.

Beth: This mural is slightly more sophisticated than the PowerPoint-presentation-style film in *Spider-Man: Far From Home*.

Ben: With the Getty images! But they also had Spider crying in front of a big Iron Man mural as well.

Beth: We've got to get into the butt shot.

John: The internet has never obsessed over an upper thigh as much as they have with this one.

Sophie: People seem sure it's a woman but I don't know.

John: It's not Winston Duke, the world's buffest vegetarian. He's got some juicy thighs.

Ben: I like all the gold accents on it.

John: That's what made people think it might be Michael B. Jordan's Killmonger.

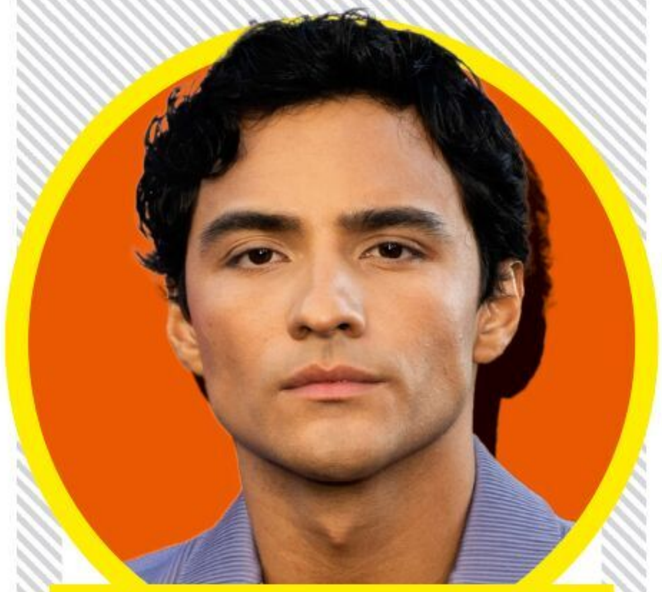
Sophie: He ain't coming back.

Mike: Do you think there's going to be multiple Black Panthers?

Ben: If this film is them processing how to continue Wakanda without T'Challa, and the way to do that is multiple people taking on the mantle before maybe settling on one person in particular, that would be so great.

BLACK PANTHER: WAKANDA FOREVER **IS IN CINEMAS FROM 11 NOVEMBER**

Getty Images



INTRODUCING...

Brandon Perea

THE 27-YEAR-OLD ACTOR PLAYS A CURIOUS TECH SALESMAN IN JORDAN PEELE'S *NOPE*

ON GETTING INTO ACTING

I breakdance on rollerskates professionally, but I've always wanted to act. My skating manager at the time told me I had to move to LA. My parents were really supportive — they said, "Just stop buying sneakers and pay rent." So I moved to LA at 16, and that's when I started acting.

ON GETTING CAST IN *NOPE*

My audition scene was set at a tech store, and usually the employees are depressed because they're dealing with people who are dumber than they are. So I brought that energy to it, and that dark sense of humour made Jordan [Peele] laugh. He told me that the character he had written was far different from what I brought to the table, and that he was going to rewrite the entire script because I got the part. I just started crying, and I got Jordan to cry as well. It was a big cry-fest.

ON PREPARING FOR THE ROLE

Jordan gave me a list of films to watch: *Close Encounters Of The Third Kind*, *No Country For Old Men*, *Alien*, *Jaws*, and *2001: A Space Odyssey*. I was like, "How is all this going to connect?" [When] he sent me the full script... [and] I started reading, it made sense.

ON FUTURE GOALS

I'm definitely interested in joining the MCU. Sam Alexander, aka Nova, would be fun to play. Spider-Man and Nova interact in the comics, and I'd love to work with Tom Holland. **AMON WARMANN**

***NOPE* IS IN CINEMAS NOW**



No./4

A new kind of comic-book movie

Director Owen Kline on *Funny Pages*, his ink-stained coming-of-ager

SOMETHING'S WRONG with the basement fish tank in Owen Kline's feature debut, *Funny Pages*. In spite of its neon-yellow glow, the water is unoccupied. The fish, teenager Robert (Daniel Zolghadri) is informed by his new landlord, has been eaten by a larger fish. No further explanation is given. It's just one of many weird details that comprise the scuzzy world of the film, which follows Robert's rebellious move out of his family home in the hopes of becoming a leading comic-book artist.

"We wanted another light source for that basement and were like, 'What if there's a really foggy, disgusting fish tank that's some unseemly colour?'" Kline tells *Empire* from an apartment lined with comic books. "I also find a lot of humour in decay."

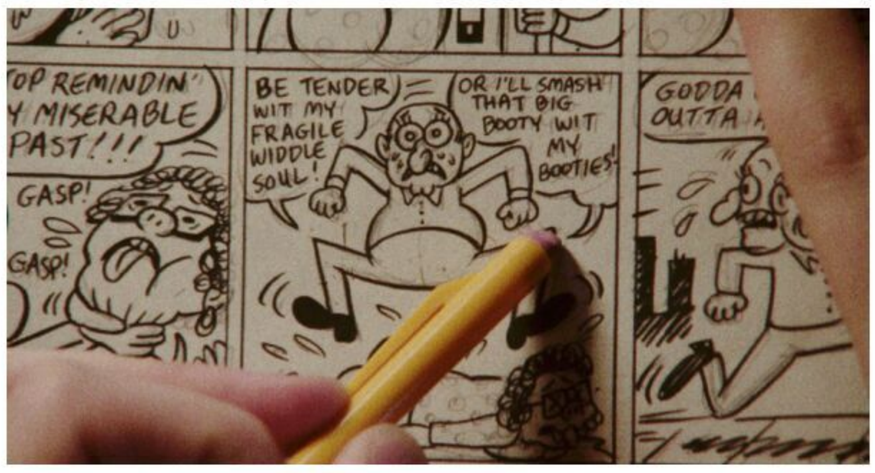
The unsettling comedy that runs through this dark indie is perhaps unsurprising from the actor-turned-director (and son of Kevin Kline and Phoebe Cates), who as a teen himself co-starred in Noah Baumbach's tormented coming-of-age drama *The Squid And The Whale*. It's the kind of comedy that involves pencil-induced head injuries, acerbic dialogue, and the community of comic-loving oddballs that Robert idolises.

"It all comes down to the characters and their confused ideas about the world," explains Kline, who also wrote the script, drawing on people he's met in New York. "I've worked on managing peoples' collections in the past: records, posters, strange rarities. People who collect old things are pretty strange."

It's also of little surprise that *Funny Pages* is produced by Josh and Benny Safdie, whose own films — such as *Uncut Gems* and *Good Time* — are peppered with similarly peculiar personalities. Kline appeared in one of the Safdies' early short films as a version of himself. "I had a reputation of going down to flea markets at the end of the day and trying to get free shit that people didn't want to trek back with them," he says.

This feels like the key to Kline's filmmaking: to collect obscure oddities, be it off-kilter characters or putrid fish tanks, and build them into something worth presenting to the world. One person's trash is another's treasure, indeed. **BETH WEBB**

***FUNNY PAGES* IS IN CINEMAS FROM 16 SEPTEMBER**





Clockwise from above: Robert (Daniel Zolghadri), with his pal Miles (Miles Emanuel) and shifty landlord (Michael Townsend White); Going to toon; Our young hero in his natural environment.

No./5

Why Martin McDonagh got the band back together

The director of THE BANSHEES OF INISHERIN on going from Oscar success to a reunion with old friends

In 2017, Martin McDonagh unleashed *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri*, a fiery crime drama which won Oscars for two of its actors (Frances McDormand and Sam Rockwell) and earned its budget back ten times over at the box office. The British-Irish writer-director scored the biggest hit of his career. After success like that, the world was his oyster. So why is his follow-up, *The Banshees Of Inisherin*, a quiet period drama set on a rural island near Galway in the 1920s? Or, as one of those billboards put it: how come, Chief Willougby?

"I mean, I loved everything that happened with *Three Billboards*," McDonagh explains to *Empire*, "but it was all unexpected. I actually think this is a really good way to follow up, *because* it's so different. It's funnier than *Billboards*. It is probably a gentler piece." Uninterested in going big and brash and Hollywood ("No, I've done that once. And I'm not going to do that again," he says, referring to his second feature, *Seven Psychopaths*), this is a muted comic drama about two friends falling out. It's McDonagh's break-up movie, then? "Put that on the poster!" he agrees. "Yeah, it's one of those break-up albums, like [Bob Dylan's] *Blood On The Tracks* or something — but with two guys who aren't romantically involved."

Set in 1923, the film depicts a very low-key, personal civil war raging on the fictional island of Inisherin, while the Irish Civil War rages on the mainland. "Which is part of the interesting hook for me," McDonagh explains. "To capture the sadness on both sides of a break-up is at least the starting point of the story."

Those "two guys" are played by Brendan Gleeson and Colin Farrell, McDonagh getting the gang back together from his cult debut feature *In*







Top to bottom: Something's come between old pals Colm (Brendan Gleeson) and Pádraic (Colin Farrell); Why the long face?; McDonagh and Farrell put up with terrible conditions on location...



Bruges. The filmmaker never even got as far as second choices for the roles. "The whole point of this, for me, was to get them back together," McDonagh says. "Because they love each other so much. And they work together so well."

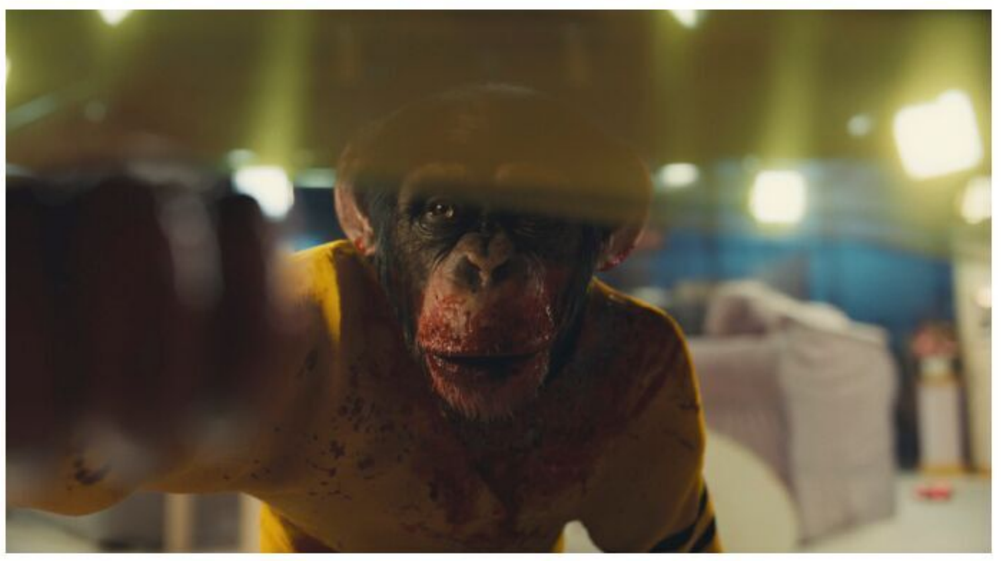
Joined by a donkey named Jenny ("I think she steals the show," McDonagh notes), the two men are in the classic McDonagh mould: sharp, sweary, sardonic and sad. And while the premise may be minimal, visually the film is anything but, with the director namechecking sweeping epics like David Lean's *Ryan's Daughter* and Terrence Malick's *Days Of Heaven* as touchstones.

"So many Irish films have a very low budget, so they probably don't have the time to concentrate on the cinematic language of beautiful imagery," he says. "We wanted to concertedly make it a beautiful film." Against all expectations, McDonagh's quietest film yet could also be his biggest. **JOHN NUGENT**

THE BANSHEES OF INISHERIN **IS IN CINEMAS FROM 21 OCTOBER**

No./6 Inside *Nope*'s chilling chimp attack







Jordan Peele and Terry Notary break down their show-stopping set-piece

"It's about exploitation," Jordan Peele tells *Empire* about one of *Nope*'s scariest sequences. "It's about feelings of rage. At the industry."

Halfway through Peele's new film, we're taken on set of [fictional] 1997 sitcom 'Gordy's Home', where the eponymous chimp goes off script and on a rampage, mauling and maiming cast and crew. In a film about spectacle, this is Peele commenting on the more parasitical corners of showbusiness. Yet it also stands alone as a terrific, terrifying set-piece.

For Gordy, created via a mix of live action and motion capture, Peele hired legendary movement coach and actor Terry Notary, who worked on the recent *Planet Of The Apes* films and *Avengers: Infinity War*. "He was my first call," says Peele. "He's the man." And, indeed, the chimp. Notary knows his apes. He didn't have to do any research, because he has so much already — on his hard drives and in his head. "I've seen most of those videos. I have a whole library of trained animals, and animal attacks," he tells us. "And I didn't want to come in copying anything."

Both Notary and Peele wanted to do something that had never been seen before. And it was personal. "Jordan talked to me a little bit about his career in the beginning," says Notary of Peele's early days as a comic actor. "He said, 'People take advantage of animals and people, and Gordy's sequence is important, because it kind of represents my early career as a performer.'" On the set, off-camera, Peele doubled-up, not only directing Notary but acting as his animal trainer.

Their collaboration was organic — it was all about nuance. "I didn't want to play evil," says Notary of Gordy's behaviour, before suddenly, mid-interview, adopting his chimp-like expression and mannerisms. "It was just, 'This is what I do! And I'm sorry about that. I know I'm probably upsetting people, but I can't help it. You are forcing me to do something that I don't do normally, and I've reached my breaking point.'"

Peele in turn ensured that throughout the sequence, Gordy's actions aren't shown to be his fault. "We fear Gordy, but we don't hate Gordy," explains the filmmaker. "I think there's an interesting thing happening for the audience there." It sure is. An unforgettable one, too. **ALEX GODFREY**

NOPE **IS OUT NOW**

Top to bottom: TV chimp Gordy (Terry Notary) is mad as hell and isn't gonna take this anymore; Gordy goes ape; Notary on set, putting blood, sweat and teeth into his performance.



No./7







Clockwise from left: Jonathan Majors as real-life aviator Jesse Brown; Is that a boyband? Nope, it's the pilots; Director J.D. Dillard on set with Majors; The sky's the limit.

The gripping true story set to take on *Top Gun*

DEVOTION director J.D. Dillard on his deeply personal aviation movie

TOP GUN: MAVERICK became the first movie of 2022 to soar past the $1-billion mark earlier this year. But while both that and *Devotion* feature Glenn Powell, as well as their fair share of exciting aerial acrobatics, Tom Cruise's film is all fiction. Which is what makes J.D. Dillard's airborne epic — based on the true story of Jesse Brown (Jonathan Majors), the first Black aviator to see combat while fighting in the Korean War — an entirely different proposition. "We had the very specific task of honouring the story of the folks that *Devotion* is about, with the backdrop of a war that has not found its way to screen often," Dillard tells *Empire* of the film, which follows Brown's journey to becoming one of the Navy's most celebrated wingmen alongside Powell's Tom Hudner.

This is an especially personal project for the director. Dillard's father was a naval aviator, which meant there were numerous parallels between the stories he'd heard growing up and Brown's. "There was suddenly an opportunity in this film to honour my dad's story too," he says. "That sort of relationship to the art is so few and far between that it really made it clear that this was the film I needed to make now."

That unique connection to the story yielded a lot of emotional moments on set. "I opened up a package from my dad in front of the whole cast, and it's the last flight jacket he had in the Navy," recalls Dillard. "It was an enormously sweet gesture, but it was also very funny to be crying in front of everybody before I even called action on the first shot of our film."

There are set to be a number of equally powerful moments on screen too, which Dillard attributes to Majors' portrayal of Brown. One particularly intense scene will see Brown staring at himself in the mirror, repeating all the many slights he's endured in order to motivate himself. "Very early on, we found out that it was something that the real Jesse Brown did," Dillard explains. "There is that odd thing about being empowered by all the reasons folks think you shouldn't be here." The director says it's one of his favourite scenes: "As a Black filmmaker, it's certainly something I feel and relate to."

Devotion is a step up in terms of scale for Dillard, who thus far has made indie drama debut *Sleight* and Blumhouse horror *Sweetheart*. But the director was driven by the need to tell a story that means so much to him. "I keep a piece of gaffer tape under my monitors that literally just says, 'What do you want them to feel?' My job is to keep track of that," he says.

With its historical setting and an emotionally charged journey at its core — Brown endured poverty in racially segregated South America before becoming the first Black man to be trained by the Navy as a naval aviator — there's plenty to set *Devotion* apart in the year of *Top Gun*'s mammoth success. It seems there's something that mattered to Dillard above all else, however. "The first time my dad watched it, he was just overwhelmed. There were some tears and a lot of pride, which I'm grateful for." Sometimes, a different kind of maverick is called for. **AMON WARMANN**

***DEVOTION* DOES NOT YET HAVE A UK RELEASE DATE**



Alamy, Allstar



No./8 NEXT IN THE SERIES

You fell in love with that incredible new TV show. And then it ended! Don't despair — Boyd Hilton recommends the sibling shows to watch next

IF YOU LOVED... BETTER CALL SAUL



THE LONE GUNMEN

(DVD)

Unbelievably unavailable on any streaming or digital platform, but at least easily found on DVD, this one-season wonder of a spin-off from *The X-Files* remains one of *Better Call Saul* co-creator Vince Gilligan's proudest achievements, despite disappointing ratings. "I would hold *The Lone Gunmen* up against anything that I have done before or since," he said recently, and, along with fellow co-creators Chris Carter, John Shiban and Frank Spotnitz, he helped maintain a high level of smart writing, wry humour and inventive visuals across 13 fine episodes involving the trio of conspiracy-theory experts.



FARGO: SEASON 1

(NETFLIX)

The series that defines Bob Odenkirk outside *Breaking Bad* and *Better Call Saul* is, of course, the ridiculously funny *Mr. Show*, but if you want to enjoy him in more of a dramatic role not a million miles away from Jimmy/Saul, watch the superb first season of Noah Hawley's TV spin-off of *Fargo*, in which he plays a barely competent cop assisting the investigation into a series of murders. Bouncing brilliantly off Allison Tolman's detective, he scuppers her work more often than helping, and his sturdy moustache is a forerunner of his flash-forward look in *Better Call Saul*.



FRANKLIN & BASH

(FREEVEE ON PRIME VIDEO)

There's a crackpot fan theory that Rhea Seehorn's iconic character Kim in *Saul* is the same person she played in frothy legal comedy-drama *Franklin & Bash* from 2011 to 2014. After all, they're both lawyers, and, um, that's about where the similarities end. But Seehorn did appear in three seasons of the series, which starred Breckin Meyer and Mark-Paul Gosselaar as light-hearted lawyer bros. Seehorn played assistant DA Ellen Swatello, who ends up having an affair with Franklin (Meyer) in Season 3. Seehorn herself describes the character as having "a lot less restraint than Kim". Needless to say, she steals all her scenes.



IN PLAIN SIGHT

(APPLE TV/PRIME VIDEO)

Brit Michael Morris directed many of the key episodes of *Better Call Saul*, including two masterpieces in the final season, 'Wine And Roses' and 'Fun And Games'. Among the other great shows he worked on, the one that's closest tonally to *Saul* is 2008's *In Plain Sight*. This unfairly overlooked, five-season, character-driven drama stars Mary McCormack as Mary Shannon, a deputy US Marshal in a little place called Albuquerque, New Mexico, attached to the witness-protection programme. Her myriad moral dilemmas have a distinct flavour of *Saul*.

***BETTER CALL SAUL* IS ON NETFLIX NOW**



No./9 Ryan Gosling: Ghost Rider

The star has said he wants to play the flame-headed motorcyclist, and Kevin Feige approves. Here's why it makes sense

HE'S NO STRANGER TO THE ROAD

First *Drive*, and then *The Place Beyond The Pines* — Ryan Gosling's filmography so often sees him taking to the road, in cars or on bikes, as a pivotal part of his performance. Who better could understand Ghost Rider's obsession with highway roaming?

HEAT HAS NEVER SCARED HIM

A key thing about Ghost Rider (aka Johnny Blaze): his head is on fire. Gosling — tap-dancing in the scorching Los Angeles sun in *La La Land* and getting dangerously close to burning to a crisp in Apollo 11 as Neil Armstrong for *First Man* — has never shied away from intense heat. Flame on.

LOVE IS ALREADY IN THE AIR

To many, Gosling's sudden ambition to play Ghost Rider might have come out of nowhere — but others will remember that Eva Mendes, the actor's wife since 2011, starred in the original *Ghost Rider* film just four years before they met. She played Nicolas Cage's love interest back then — this new film is already casting itself…

IT'S IN HIS BONES

In 2009, Dead Man's Bones came to life — a band formed by Gosling and Zach Shields, because they'd always been obsessed with the Haunted Mansion ride at Disneyland. Their shtick was songs about ghosts and monsters (performed with choirs of kids dressed as ghouls) — so for Gosling to play Ghost Rider would be a beautiful full-circle moment. **ELLA KEMP**



No./10

A foodie thriller plating up privilege

Succession director Mark Mylod talks us through his star-studded gastro-satire, THE MENU

AS THE DIRECTOR of some of *Succession*'s most memorable episodes — including its Season 3 finale — Mark Mylod knows all about conjuring great art from preposterous elitism. His new film, *The Menu*, packs a similar, darkly satirical punch to the hit HBO show, but aims its sights squarely on high-end, ultra-exclusive dining. "I'm fascinated by the idea of extreme privilege and how it perverts humanity," Mylod tells *Empire*. "So while the film is comedic, there are thriller and horror elements, too. I like things you can't easily put into one box." Here, Mylod breaks down his category-defying cinematic feast.

THE CONCEPT

The film sees a wealthy couple (Nicholas Hoult and Anya Taylor-Joy) visit the remote island restaurant of famed experimental chef Slowik (Ralph Fiennes). While the diners are busy Instagramming their luxury fare, however, things take a turn for the deeply unsettling. "The idea came from an experience [the film's co-writer] Will Tracy had in Norway," Mylod explains. "He was in a foodie phase, searching for the world's best restaurants, and he was told to go to this quay and 'await instructions'." A tugboat pulled up to sail Tracy and his fellow diners to an unknown location. "They'd paid all this money so they just trusted the experience. With *The Menu*, the thought was, 'What if these people *weren't* so trustworthy...?'"

THE THEMES

The story's heart, says Mylod, is the exploration of "this strange need we have for things that are more and more exclusive: this idea of the VIP room *within* the VIP room. In the world of high-end molecular cuisine, that concept has been taken to extraordinary levels." Indeed, *The Menu* looks set to push culinary absurdism way beyond *Succession*'s Tom and Greg munching deep-fried songbird with napkins over their heads. "You will ingest *entire ecosystems*," Fiennes declares in the film, and according to Mylod, "This is very much food as art. For Slowik, it's about controlling every element — not just the food, but the restaurant's smell, air quality, design. He wants a totally immersive experience."



Clockwise from left: Compliments to the chef?: Anya Taylor-Joy and Ralph Fiennes; Director Mark Mylod consults with Fiennes on cuisine-handling.

THE CAST

Slowik himself is an "amalgam of types", says the director. From René Redzepi, head chef of Noma in Copenhagen, to Ferran Adrià — "the grandparent of molecular gastronomy" — Fiennes' creation is a Frankenstein's monster of gourmet perfectionists. "Ralph's precision as an actor suited the character's obsessiveness and complexity," says Mylod. "He understood the purity of [Slowik's] need to feed, however perverted that becomes in our story."

As for the diners themselves, Hoult plays Tyler, "a disciple of the great chef: he has truly drunk the Kool-Aid," laughs Mylod. Whereas Taylor-Joy, as Tyler's partner Margot, is more sceptical of this ultra-elitist environment. "We needed a whistleblower," Mylod says. "Anya is the outsider who walks into this world and says, 'Hang on, that emperor has no clothes.'"

Kitchen nightmares and (metaphorically) naked chefs: dinnertime doesn't get weirder than this. **TOM ELLEN**

***THE MENU* IS IN CINEMAS FROM 18 NOVEMBER**

Getty Images



No./11

The serial-killer story that puts evil in scrubs

Writer Krysty Wilson-Cairns on true-crime medical thriller The Good Nurse

DID YOU KNOW that nurse Charles Cullen killed probably ten times as many people as Ted Bundy? Krysty Wilson-Cairns didn't. The Oscar-winning screenwriter behind *Last Night In Soho* fell down the rabbit hole of the American healthcare system after reading about Cullen, the most prolific killer in US history, in Charles Graeber's 2013 book, *The Good Nurse*. And what she learned inspired her to write a new kind of thriller.



Above, left to right: Charles Cullen (Eddie Redmayne) and Amy Loughren (Jessica Chastain); Nurse Amy helped to catch Cullen.

"I was adamant I wasn't going to write another serial-killer movie," Wilson-Cairns tells *Empire* about the film, due to screen at this year's BFI London Film Festival, which casts Eddie Redmayne as Cullen and Jessica Chastain as Amy Loughren, the nurse who helped catch him. "It's about systems failing people. In this case it's healthcare systems, but systems failing us is very universal."

Graeber went to visit Cullen in prison three times a week for over a year and still never got answers about why he injected insulin and digoxin into the IV bags of hundreds of patients, killing them without touching them. "The most terrifying thing about this story is that you could replace Charles Cullen with a virus. He's this entity that wants to kill, and he was passed on from place to place," Wilson-Cairns says.

But beyond the cover-ups, *The Good Nurse* also wrestles with the commodification of innocent patients and employees robbed of rights under an unfair system. Charles Cullen remains behind bars, but with mounting pressure on healthcare services around the world, the film was always about more than the anatomy of a serial killer. "It's a problem with greed, and I have a problem with that, and any healthcare provider with morals should have a problem with that," Wilson-Cairns says. She, and *The Good Nurse*, are about to take a scalpel to the whole system. **ELLA KEMP**

***THE GOOD NURSE* IS SCREENING IN ASSOCIATION WITH *EMPIRE* AT THE BFI LONDON FILM FESTIVAL ON 10 OCTOBER**

No./12 His Guy Cary

Jason Isaacs on his formidable new challenge: playing Cary Grant in a new biopic series



IF YOU DID a double take, maybe a devilishly debonair one, when you heard Jason Isaacs was going to play Cary Grant in new ITV series *Archie*, you aren't alone. Isaacs did too. "Someone called me and said, 'Do you want to play Cary Grant?' 'Not in a million fucking years!'" laughs the actor, talking exclusively to *Empire*. "Then they said, 'How about playing Archibald Leach?'" And that was it. He was in.

Archibald Leach was, of course, a boy from Bristol who, due to a combination of good looks, fortune and talent, reinvented himself as Cary Grant, the matinée idol's matinée idol, star of *Charade* and *An Affair To Remember*, and possessor of one of the most interesting accents in movie history. But Grant was very much a construct; off-camera, the reclusive Archie Leach was in the driving seat. And in the new series, that will become clear. Which means that Isaacs — who will play the star in his later life — doesn't have to worry about an impression of that famous transatlantic accent. "Jeff [Pope, the show's writer] has worked with Steve Coogan, and I'm sure Steve can do a brilliant Cary Grant," says Isaacs. "I've no interest in doing that. I certainly will never look like him, but emotionally I hope I can begin to tiptoe in the shadow somewhere."

Isaacs was far from a Grant scholar when he was offered the role. "I wasn't sure I'd ever seen a [Grant] film start to finish," he chuckles. That's now changed. His favourite today? "*His Girl Friday*. It's really a musical with the songs cut, and he didn't get to do that stuff later in life." With this research under Isaacs' belt, we could be in for a performance to remember. **CHRIS HEWITT**

***ARCHIE* IS ON NEW STREAMING SERVICE ITVX LATER THIS YEAR**



No./13

The teen horror show Mike Flanagan was meant to make

An emotional bond ties the genre master to his latest show, THE MIDNIGHT CLUB

EMPIRE IS SHOCKED. Mike Flanagan, director of *Doctor Sleep* and creator of three of TV's scariest mini-series (*The Haunting Of Hill House, The Haunting Of Bly Manor* and *Midnight Mass*), has just admitted he couldn't handle horror until well into his teens. "I would fake being sick at sleepovers if they were going to watch a horror movie," he says. "I could only watch scary stuff through my fingers."

Instead, he came into the genre through books, whose frights he figured (incorrectly, it turned out) would be easier to manage. And the writer who made the biggest impact on the

Getty Images









Clockwise from left: Come join their club; *Elm Street*'s Heather Langenkamp as Dr Stanton; The kids shed some light on the mystery; *Midnight Mass* alumna Annarah Cymone carries on screaming. **Below:** Creator Mike Flanagan.

adolescent Flanagan was Young Adult thrill-maestro Christopher Pike. "His work was hugely formative for me," Flanagan says. "He wrote some pretty advanced stuff for his young readers, and it was not at all uncommon for his teenage characters to die, pretty shockingly. His books were full of things I found really exciting and thrilling and dark. So I became a bit of an addict."

Flanagan's favourite Pike novel was *The Midnight Club*, the story of a group of terminally ill teens in a hospice who tell each other scary stories and make a pact that the first of them to die will attempt to contact the rest from the other side. It was a "gem hidden away amid all Pike's bubble-gum thrillers", Flanagan says; a scary story that, to his immense surprise, made him cry. He even tried to adapt it into a student movie while at college, but received a terrifying cease-and-desist letter from the publisher after eagerly sending them his script. ("I burned it!")

Unsurprisingly, since establishing himself as one of Hollywood's finest purveyors of sub-zero chills, Flanagan received Pike's blessing to adapt the novel into a show — which he co-created with Leah Fong — after tracking down the author on Facebook. Not only to option *The Midnight Club*, but a whole array of Pike's works, which Flanagan and Fong smartly adapted into the stories told by the young characters.

The show is suitable for kids, says Flanagan. But don't make the mistake of thinking it will be significantly less hair-whitening than his earlier work. "One of the big things we assumed was that the younger viewers could handle scares," he says. Instead, he dialled back on some other Flanagan trademarks; "I wouldn't subject a viewer of *The Midnight Club* to an eight-minute monologue," he laughs.

Plus, there is still plenty in there for the older Flanagan fan. Familiar faces from his other shows will pop up in the tales told by the club, while he also cast the lead actor of one of the first horror movies he *did* sit through, in the key role of the doctor who runs the hospice. "Heather Langenkamp is royalty," Flanagan says of the *Nightmare On Elm Street* star. "You never know if her character is a hero or a villain, and Heather plays that really well." He smiles. "Working on a Christopher Pike show with Heather Langenkamp was like all my teenage dreams coming true on one set!" Although, perhaps teenage nightmares would be more appropriate — in the best possible way. **DAN JOLIN**



***THE MIDNIGHT CLUB* IS ON NETFLIX FROM 7 OCTOBER**

No. /14

"There was only one accident on set. It was just a flesh wound"

[THE Q&A] **As a younger, pluckier Galadriel in *The Lord Of The Rings: The Rings Of Power*, MORFYDD CLARK is ready for anything**

MORFYDD CLARK HAS been working on screen since 2014, but it was the Welsh actor's intense turn in Rose Glass' 2019 horror *Saint Maud* — about an unstable hospice nurse who descends into psychosis — that shook us up. Since then, she's starred in *His Dark Materials*, Craig Roberts' comic-drama *Eternal Beauty* and the BBC's 2020 take on *Dracula*, but now, as Galadriel in Prime Video's *The Lord Of The Rings* prequel, she'll be taking on orcs, trolls and all matter of evil. As she tells us, she was born to do it...



Did you have to audition for Galadriel?
Many, many times [*laughs*]. The first one, I didn't know what I was auditioning for. The actress next to me looked over all sneaky and was like, "Do you know what this is for? It's *Lord Of The Rings*." And I'm forever grateful to her. Because I went into the toilet and just stared at myself and was like, "You've gotta pull yourself together. You've been training for this for *years*. You know what to do, it's in your blood." Because I'd been obsessively watching *Lord Of The Rings* for my whole childhood.

You play an armoured Galadriel in the show. There is fighting, and swordplay. Did you avoid injury?
I did avoid injury. Well, there was one accidental thing that was very much my fault, with Charlie Vickers [who plays Halbrand]. That was just Charlie and I thinking that we could create our own stunt routine. And we couldn't. It was just a flesh wound. But otherwise I avoided injury completely, and then, on my first day of Comic-Con press, twisted my knee. So I was like, "This is ridiculous."



Did you meet any Galadriels at Comic-Con?
I did. I got to meet one cosplayer who'd made the armour that was in the first image of Galadriel that was released, and it was incredible. Kate Hawley, the costume designer, was like, "I want to make it really difficult for them. I want it to be a real challenge." So when I saw that she'd managed to do it I was like, "Wow, respect. That is hard."

Top: From *Maud* to Middle-earth: Morfydd Clark. **Above:** As Galadriel in *The Rings Of Power*, with Halbrand (Charlie Vickers).

Is that what you said to her? "Respect"?
I think I mostly squeaked.

Before *Rings*, we spoke to you for the terrifying *Saint Maud*. For the trailer the studio used a quote from our writer James' response to the film: "Fuck me!"
[*Laughs*] I had no idea how scared *Saint Maud* would make people, particularly men. And that was a real pleasure of my life.

Scaring men?
Yeah! I just never saw myself as having the capacity to be frightening. So that was quite liberating.

Did that change the way you saw yourself going forward?
Not in terms of *Saint Maud* — I didn't want to take on much of her going forward with my life, because she wasn't a very happy person. But when I was playing Galadriel, the stunt-team said, "You've got a problem, because you're used to being attacked on film." Because I would flinch a lot when people came at me. So they did exposure therapy with me, where I would have all these huge, huge men running at me, screaming with swords. To stop me from looking frightened. Because I've definitely been cast as the victim. And Galadriel is not that. So that *has* changed my opinion of myself.

A couple of years ago you played Mina in the BBC's *Dracula*. Clearly you have a thing for the dark side.
I do really enjoy it, and I've grown up watching lots of horror. In horror, there were really interesting female characters, and they were often the lead, which in other things wasn't the case.

You're about to star as Ophelia in a modern-day film adaptation of *Hamlet*, and she certainly contains darkness.
I'm really excited to play her. And I think that there *is* a horror aspect to lots of the women in Shakespeare's tragedies. They're screaming into the void, and no-one's listening to them. **ALEX GODFREY**

***THE LORD OF THE RINGS: THE RINGS OF POWER* IS ON PRIME VIDEO FROM 2 SEPTEMBER**

Guy Coombes

No./15 The crazy creatures of *Strawberry Mansion*



The filmmakers of the year's quirkiest sci-fi on making their dreams (and nightmares) a reality

IMAGINE A CROSS between Michel Gondry, David Lynch and *The Mighty Boosh*, and you're somewhere close to *Strawberry Mansion*, a hugely imaginative new indie sci-fi from co-writers and co-directors Albert Birney and Kentucker Audley. Audley also stars as James Preble, a government agent who audits dreams — joined by an ensemble cast of bizarre beastly bit-players, both dreamy and nightmarish. Here, the filmmakers explain three of their favourite phantasmagorical creations.





Top to bottom: The blue demon goes for a dip; A frog with sax appeal; Those sailors look a bit ratty to us.

SAXOPHONE FROG WAITER!

"If you've got to have a waiter in a movie," asks Birney rhetorically, "why have a normal *human* waiter?" So, in one dream sequence, Audley's character has asparagus soup served to him by a jazz-loving amphibian. Like many in the film, the costume was homespun. "One of the great joys of filmmaking is the tactile nature [of it]," says Birney. "You know, making papier-mâché out of flour and glue, and then waiting two days for it to dry, and putting another layer on and waiting two more days for it to dry..."

RAT SAILORS!

Not every costume was quite as rustic. A dream at sea (partly inspired by the swashbuckling of *Time Bandits*) sees a crew of rat sailors man a ship, with surprisingly realistic puppetry. "We were able to commission some really talented mask-makers in Baltimore," says Audley. "They pulled an all-nighter to finish them," recalls Birney. "We hadn't seen the rat heads until the morning we were filming with them. But the moment they put them on, with their sailor outfits — you could feel the change over the whole crew. They were just incredible."

FLAMING BLUE DEMON!

Some of the dream creatures are more odious — such as the horned blue demon, with a fiery head. The demon, Birney says, was supposed to represent "this thing that is lurking inside of all of us — some kind of monster that we all keep locked away." Yet it's also charmingly down-to-earth, at one point watching a news bulletin presented by a fellow demon about a "lettuce recall". Explains Birney: "It's the idea of, 'Okay, but this demon also has to cook dinner and watch TV.'" Nightmare monsters — they're just like us! **JOHN NUGENT**

***STRAWBERRY MANSION* IS IN CINEMAS FROM 16 SEPTEMBER**

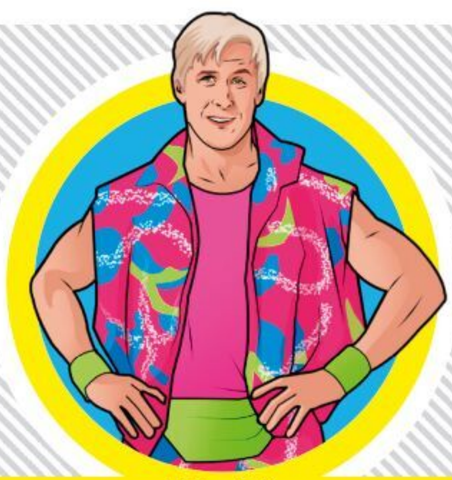
[TREND REPORT]

No./16 RETRO VESTS

These garish gilets prove that you don't need sleeves to make a statement

WORDS **BETH WEBB**

ILLUSTRATIONS **BILL McCONKEY**



KEN

BARBIE

This ridiculously fun-looking comedy boasts an array of retina-stinging 'fits, but you can practically touch the Kenergy emanating from this bold windbreaker (complete with neon-yellow fanny pack) worn by Ryan Gosling's human doll.



EDDIE MUNSON

STRANGER THINGS

Joseph Quinn's guitar-shredding Dungeons & Dragons leader doesn't just rock a Metallica cover. His stonewash-denim vest, worn with Hellfire Club tee, proves '80s fashion can be cool, plus a practical choice for slaying bat demons.



THOR

THOR: LOVE AND THUNDER

Why bother kitting out the God Of Thunder in Asgard's finest armour when he can kick ass in a studded red-and-black biker vest capable of making KISS blush? When it comes to the hero of hair metal in the MCU, there's no competition.



No./17

The Swimmers

[ON-SET REPORT] The true story of an Olympic athlete and her sister fleeing Syria gets the feature-length treatment

WHERE? Duxford Airfield, Cambridge.

WHEN? 11 May 2021.

WHY? To visit the set of Sally El Hosaini's Syrian-refugee biopic, which follows two swimming sisters on a harrowing journey from war-torn Damascus to the 2016 Rio Olympics, where one competed. With three siblings himself, screenwriter Jack Thorne understood how to showcase Yusra and Sarah Mardini's story, tracking their emotional departure from home, familial tension, and water-based acts of heroism. But Welsh-Egyptian El Hosaini has helped Thorne to authentically represent these Middle-Eastern women: "They're like my friends and the people I grew up with," she says.

WHO DID WE SEE? Rising Lebanese star Manal Issa (*Parisienne*, *The Sea Ahead*) and her sister Nathalie play Sarah and Yusra respectively, and their sibling energy is evident as they bound onto set. *Army Of The Dead*/*Thieves*' Matthias Schweighöfer is the most recognisable face as their German swimming coach Sven Spannekrebs, but El Hosaini was keen to fill the cast with established and emerging stars from the Arab world, including Palestinian icon Ali Suliman as their father and coach, and Syrian actress Kinda Alloush as their mother.

WHAT WAS BEING FILMED? A white, commercial-looking jet is being used to film interior shots of the trio's initial journey from Syria to Turkey, where they get their first taste of dehumanisation. "There was an announcement on the plane that life jackets are the property of the airline and anyone caught taking them would be in trouble," El Hosaini explains. "Their cousin jokes to them, 'The airline would like to remind us that we're a bunch of filthy refugees now.'" The three get friendlier treatment in a scene representing their long-awaited arrival in Germany, after perilously surviving an Aegean Sea crossing from Turkey to Greece — where the sisters' heroic swimming saves lives — and on foot through Macedonia and Hungary. On a bright day, the sisters, in tracksuits, smile excitedly as they descend the coach stairs to meet cheering volunteers, including a cameo from the real Spannekrebs, welcoming them to the Berlin refugee centre — a giant hangar filled with dorm-style bunk beds that hundreds of displaced individuals and families will have to share while they await their asylum decision.



Clockwise from left: Sarah (Nathalie Issa) in training; Shooting a poolside chat; The sisters as refugees; Yusra (Manal Issah) just wants a sporting chance.







IS IT A SPORTS FILM? Yes and no. El Hosaini has a clear vision of how she wants to depict this underdog athlete making it to the world stage of competition. We watch her calmly and decisively block out what she wants a refugee-centre workout montage to look like. But she has more than just a sports, or even refugee, story to tell. "For me, what adds depth, complexity and layers is the fact that this is a film about two heroes," she says. "At its heart, it's a love story between sisters, so it's staying close to the emotional story. That's the core, the heart, the soul of everything." **HANNA FLINT**

***THE SWIMMERS* IS ON NETFLIX LATER THIS YEAR**



No./18

The TV offer Stallone couldn't refuse

Why the star signed up for his first leading small-screen role: a Mafia capo in Tulsa King

SYLVESTER STALLONE DOESN'T do TV. Oh sure, there's been the odd cameo and voice gig, but otherwise, he's been committed to Rambo, Rocky and the rest on the big screen. As for the small? Fuhgeddaboudit. "I peaked when I did *The Muppet Show* in 1977," laughs Stallone. "I can't do any better than that. Then, everything changed."

Because Stallone *is* finally doing TV, starring in *Tulsa King*, a new series created by Taylor Sheridan, with whom Stallone became friendly after meeting at an LA ranch. "Where did this come from? A fellow cowboy. If we didn't have a mutual interest in horses, we never would have talked," says Stallone.

When they first met, Sheridan was an actor dabbling with screenplays. Today, he is one of the biggest creative forces in television, thanks to the empire he built with *Yellowstone* and its spin-offs. That empire is expanding further with *Mayor Of Kingstown*, the upcoming *Bass Reeves* and *Tulsa King*, in which Stallone plays Dwight 'The General' Manfredi, a New York gangster who, after getting out of prison, is sent by his bosses to Tulsa to establish a foothold. "Taylor knew me," says Stallone. "He said, 'I want to do a show about a gangster going west.' He's very hung up on the Western, but how does it manifest itself across the country? Okay, take a gangster and put them right next to a cactus, and let the fun begin."

Above: Stallone plays New York gangster Dwight 'The General' Manfredi. **Below:** Dwight surveys his new local in Tulsa.

For Stallone, it gave him a chance to scratch an itch he's had since the '70s, when, as a struggling Italian-American actor, he was desperate to appear in a little movie called *The Godfather*. "I went to Paramount, and said, 'Can I be an extra in the wedding scene?'" he recalls. "They said, 'Yeah, we don't know if you're the type of guy.' I go, 'I'm not the type? To play in the background, hiding behind a fucking wedding cake?' So finally I get my gangster shot 50 years later, and that's perfect. Everything comes to those who wait." The only way it could get more perfect is if Kermit The Frog showed up. **CHRIS HEWITT**

***TULSA KING* IS ON PARAMOUNT+ UK FROM 14 NOVEMBER**



No./19

The star who took sci-fi into the future

[IN MEMORIAM]

Exclusively for *Empire*, *Star Trek*'s 21st-century Uhura, Zoe Saldaña, celebrates NICHELLE NICHOLS, her trailblazing forerunner

PEOPLE OFTEN start tributes to Nichelle Nichols talking about her importance from a social justice point of view. Yes, she was the first Black woman to play a role like Uhura on TV: confident, beautiful and accomplished. But some people are born to be exceptional, regardless of gender, shape or colour, and that was Nichelle. Her legacy is a testament to her essence, not just her place in time.

Nichelle was an artist through and through: what you might call a "triple threat", though I hate that term. I don't consider it threatening to master more trades within the art medium. I met her when she was already a legend. What made her great to me was how generous she was with herself. She shared her thoughts, her energy and words of encouragement. She shared her life experiences in the hope that you would find solace and purpose in them. I remember walking the red carpet with her at the BET Awards in 2009, and she was like a mermaid. She wore a beautiful dress, engaged with everybody, and









Clockwise from main: Nichelle Nichols as Uhura in 1966; Zoe Saldaña and Nichols at the 2009 BET Awards; Saldaña as Uhura in 2016's *Star Trek Beyond*.

just glided along. The level of presence and confidence that she had was astonishing.

What I'm saying makes it sound like I was in her company many times, and I wish that were the case. I'm glad that, when I made my first *Star Trek*, we spent so many moments together. She was so excited and so complimentary of everything when she visited the set. She reminisced about when it all started, and what Gene Roddenberry meant to her. She came to understand what he was trying to do when he created Uhura, and what Uhura meant for so many women and people of colour in America and around the world.

Of course, it was Martin Luther King Jr who told Nichelle what Uhura was going to represent in the long run. He told her, "You are a woman of colour, in that hypothetical post-racial scenario that we are striving to create. You are compelling everybody to dream big, to take up space." In *Star Trek*, Roddenberry created a team that included a Black woman of authority and power, an Asian man, a Russian, an alien. He gave them a common goal, forcing them to interact and find solace in their differences. It's an evergreen message of peace and community.

I think I was naive when I accepted the role because I grew up with *Star Trek* on in the background, but it belonged to the generation before me, to my mother. She was the one who was excited when I was offered this revamp, and she shared with me what it meant to her. She used to watch *Star Trek* with her grandparents while her mother emigrated to New York, and when she followed, New York felt like outer space to her because there were people from all walks of life, speaking all different languages. She was an outsider, like Uhura, communicating with a new world.

Nichelle took *Star Trek*'s message of peace forward. She was a mentor to people like astronaut Mae Jemison, and to me. I have a great appreciation for those like Nichelle who paved the way for my generation to walk. Her work, marching and mentoring, and being outspoken, is why I am able to be who I am today.

Science-fiction like *Star Trek* that reflected the real world helped my mother to dream, and she gave that to my sisters and I. As the daughters of immigrants, women of colour, science-fiction gave us the escapism we needed when times were tough. Even today, it's where I feel happy. People need to dream. Where would we be if great leaders hadn't dreamed of a better world and tried to manifest that? Nichelle and Uhura were a beautiful part of that dream, and helped to manifest that reality. She will be missed.

Alamy, Getty Images, MPTV



No./20

Remembering the electrifying Olivia Newton-John

[IN MEMORIAM]

Empire salutes the late, great Olivia Newton-John's iconic performance in Grease

BEFORE WALKING THE halls of Rydell High School in *Grease* in 1978, Olivia Newton-John was a wholesome, Grammy-winning country singer with seven US number-one singles under her belt. Yet as Sandy — aka the painfully prim Sandra Dee — Newton-John turned in an astonishing, surprising and career-defining performance. We hail three of the key moments.

THE DRIVE-IN

Newton-John — a self-described girl next door who made an impression upon the film's producer, Alan Carr, at a dinner party — was 29 when she was offered the role of high-school sweetheart Sandy opposite John Travolta's heartbreaker Danny. The scene the pair acted out in their screen test — in which Danny and Sandy set off on an ill-fated date to the drive-in — proved such a hit that Carr claims it wasn't originally scripted for the feature, but made it in anyway. Sweet, lovestruck but brimming with agency, Newton-John summoned power in a poodle skirt and subverted any tropes of weakness with her determination — so much so that the part was rewritten to accommodate her Australian accent.

THE SLEEPOVER

It takes a certain kind of presence to outshine a musical number about your character's flaws, but in spite of Rizzo's rousing rendition of 'Look At Me, I'm Sandra Dee', Newton-John managed it in showstopping style. Her lilting solo performance of the Oscar-nominated 'Hopelessly Devoted To You' proved that she didn't need Travolta — coming fresh off the buzz from *Saturday Night Fever* — to bring dazzling energy to a scene, even if she had significantly less acting experience.

THE TRANSFORMATION

With those stitched-on black Lycra trousers (literally: the costume department had to sew her into them), Newton-John spent the seven hours it took to film 'You're The One That I Want' shedding that once wholesome persona and finding a new identity. Everything about her commitment to the performance was crystallised in a few white-hot seconds. A slow pan up from bright-red heels, a lick of the teeth, and those immortal five words: "Tell me about it, stud." In those few seconds the world became hopelessly devoted to Olivia Newton-John. **BETH WEBB**

Above: She's the one that we want: Olivia Newton-John, 1948–2022. **Below:** The famous drive-in scene was not in the movie's original screenplay.



PINT OF MILK

JEFFREY DEAN MORGAN

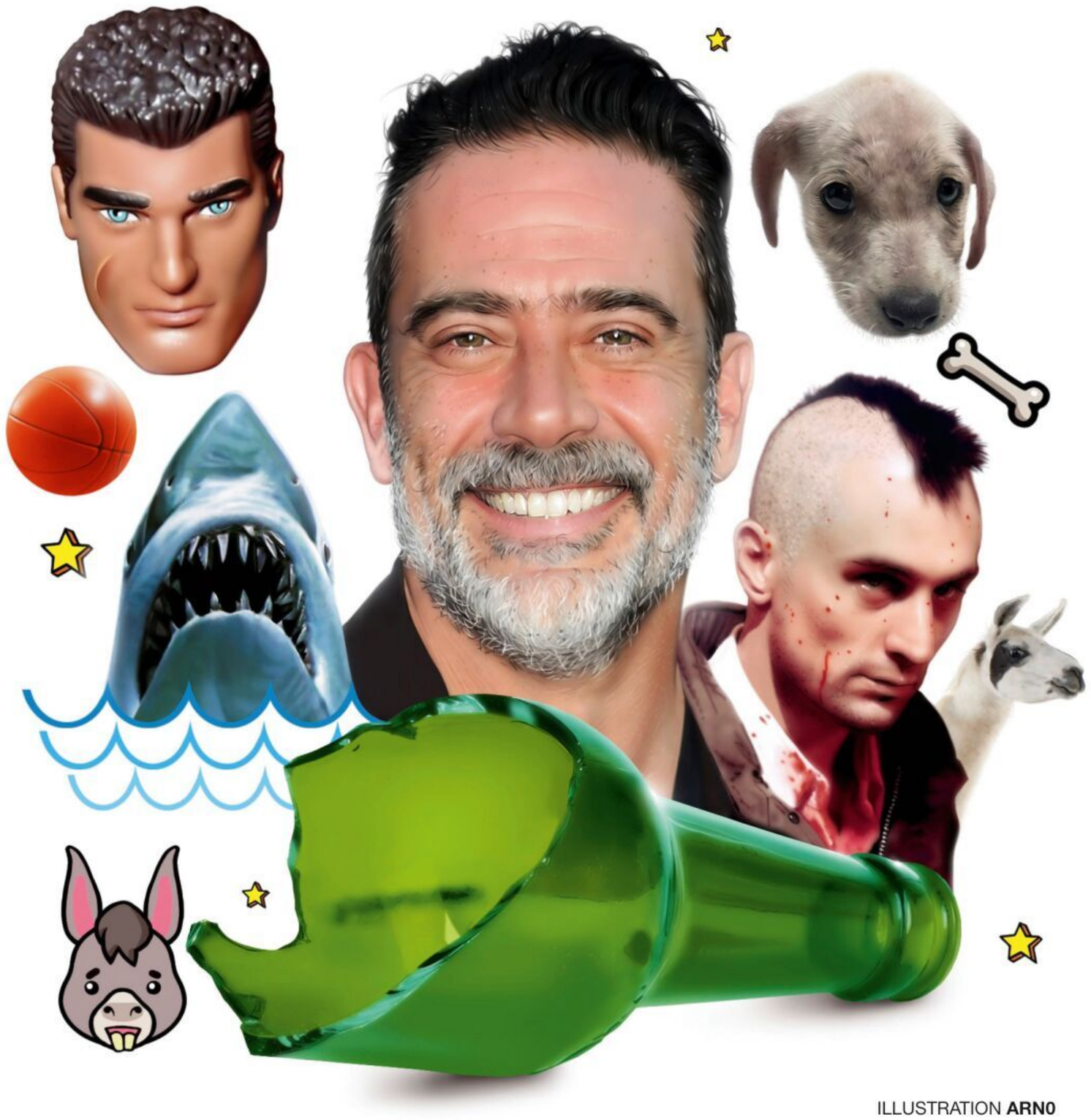


ILLUSTRATION **ARN0**

Which movie have you seen the most?
I've seen *Jaws* probably 300 times. My son's 12, and it's his favourite film, too. Plus, I just watched it with my four-year-old daughter — her first time — and she loved it. She wasn't even scared. Whereas I saw it when it came out and I couldn't even swim in a *pool* for a while afterwards.

When have you been most starstruck?
I met De Niro making [2015 thriller] *Heist*. That was pretty cool. He couldn't have been a sweeter guy. I was dying to ask him about *Taxi Driver* and all the other classics he's done, but I managed to hold back. We both own log cabins, so we chatted about that. Plus, at a party many moons ago I met Mick Jagger and Jack Nicholson. At the same time! I wish I could tell you more about that party because it was crazy. But I can't. All I'll say is: everybody had a really good time [*laughs*].

Do you have a nickname?
I mostly get 'JDM', but in high school they used to call me 'The Morg'. All my old friends from way back when still call me that. I was a basketball player in high school, and I remember people in the stands chanting, "Take 'em to the morgue!"

How much is a pint of milk?
I don't know... I'll say 75p. That's about right? Good! I didn't know if there was milk inflation going on in the UK, or something.

What's your favourite animal?
At my core I'm a dog guy. We have three: the most recent is a Puerto Rican Sato jungle dog with three legs. He's called Irwin: our newest family member. But I'm a big fan of all animals. I have a farm, and we take in cattle, sheep, alpacas, chickens, goats, ducks, donkeys, everything. We had a donkey born on the farm, and I named him Paxton after my buddy Bill Paxton. Paxton follows me around. He imprinted on me when he was born, so whenever I get to the farm, he's yelling at me to come and play.

Do you have any scars?
I got tons. After 56 years of living, and not being the most graceful human being in the world, I've got a lot of scars. There's one on my face I got years back when a woman hit me with a bottle. I was riding through Los Angeles on my motorcycle — it was the middle of the afternoon and I saw a guy beating a girl in the parking lot of a 7-Eleven. So, I pulled into the parking lot and threw him off her — and as I was dealing with him, she whacked me with a bottle. Split my face wide open. I got back on my motorcycle and drove to the hospital. This was before helmet laws, so by the time I got there, the wound was full of bugs and it had opened up big enough to fit a golf ball in. The plastic surgeon sewed it up, but that night I went out, had a couple of drinks and ended up laughing so hard that I split the stitches. I just thought: fuck it, and put some Band-Aids on it. So now I've got this scar. I can't even remember what side of my face it's on... [*Holds his phone screen up to examine his face*] There it is! On the right cheek, like G.I. Joe. It's my G.I. Joe scar.

COMING SOON

THE WALKING DEAD
OCTOBER 2022
Morgan sees out his six-year run as Negan, one of the show's most complex characters, as the final season ends. Negan's arc has seen him go from notorious villain to underdog hero, although his story is far from over.

ISLE OF THE DEAD
2023
Negan will return in one of many *Walking Dead* spin-offs. The series will reunite unlikely allies Negan and Lauren Cohan's Maggie Rhee (the former having killed the latter's spouse) in post-apocalyptic Manhattan.

On a scale of one to ten, how hairy is your arse?
My ass? I'm gonna say two. I don't have a hairy ass. I got a little bit of hair just above my ass. But no hair on my ass. Do we count that patch above the ass? Maybe one-and-a-half.

What one thing do you do better than anyone else you know?
Fucking *nothing*. No, wait: I can manage to put a swear word in any sentence with anyone I'm talking to *[laughs]*. The only bad part is: so can my four-year-old daughter.

What would you call your autobiography?
'Can You Fucking Believe It?' **TOM ELLEN**

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[EDITED BY JOHN NUGENT]



[FILM]

CRIMES OF THE FUTURE

★★★★

OUT **9 SEPTEMBER** / CERT **18**
107 MINS

DIRECTOR David Cronenberg
CAST Viggo Mortensen, Léa Seydoux, Kristen Stewart, Scott Speedman

PLOT The future. Humans have evolved, pain can't be felt and surgery is the new sex. With partner Caprice (Seydoux), Saul Tenser (Mortensen) is famed for sacrificing his organs as erotic performance art, but with the emergence of a mysterious group comes a sinister development: are humans evolving too fast?

IN MAY, WHEN it played at Cannes, *Crimes Of The Future* was met with a quivering river of walk-outs, but also a six-minute standing ovation. Even in the fickle hysteria of Cannes, it was obvious Cronenberg's latest would prove divisive. With its slurpy autopsies and opulent wound-licking, this is not a film to watch munching a hotdog, or God forbid a burrito, but what did those Cannes walk-outers expect? Objecting to Cronenberg being transgressive is like complaining Michael Bay films have too many explodo-booms. Provocative is what he does.

This, his first horror since 1999's *eXistenZ*, is being hailed as a comeback of sorts, but he never really washed his hands of the genre. His first novel, *Consumed*, was published in 2014 and slithered with cannibals and flesh-nesting insects. And besides, *Crimes Of The Future* was originally scheduled for a 2006 release, then titled 'Painkiller' and starring Ralph Fiennes.





Clockwise from left: Erotic performance artists Caprice (Léa Seydoux) and Saul Tenser (Viggo Mortensen); A sombre soirée; That beauty was in there somewhere.

Which begs the question: what prompted Cronenberg to revive it?

Crimes Of The Future is a movie with a lot on its mind. Cronenberg is 79 now and the film raises questions, not only about mortality, but the future of mankind itself. From *Scanners*' mutant psychics to *The Fly*'s metamorphosis, evolution is the pumping heart of Cronenberg's body horrors. In *Crimes Of The Future*, he takes the concept to new nihilistic extremes. Set in a decrepit, polluted techno-future, humans have evolved into an unfeeling, pain-free species, immune to trauma and disease. The exception appears to be Viggo Mortensen's performance artist Saul Tenser: a living, coughing factory of functionless body organs whose tumours are tattooed and extracted by his partner (Léa Seydoux) for an audience of horny voyeurs. Only Cronenberg could make something so shocking appear decadently perverse: the live autopsies are styled like the orgy in *Eyes Wide Shut* crossed with a Toby Carvery, and feel both alien and weirdly familiar. It's the same insurgent erotica of *Rabid*, *Dead Ringers* and *Crash*.

Those scenes are the first of many nostalgic call-backs to the director's past horrors. *Videodrome*'s analogue TVs get a cameo; Tenser's bug-like 'OrchidBed' and xenomorphic 'BreakFaster chair' look like organic offcuts from *eXistenZ*. But it doesn't stop there. Devotees of the auteur will be playing Cronen-bingo here. There's the aloof, surgical gaze. The graphic, shivering gore. The roll-call of pulpy names (hello, Lang Dotrice, Dani Router and, surely the winner, Brent Boss).

And, of course, there's the stiff, sterile line-readings. For non-converts, this will take some adjusting to. Early on, the dialogue is so prescriptive it sounds like the cast are reading not a script but an instruction manual (the detached tone eventually makes sense: in a future without pain, how else would people speak other than in a spooky, anaesthetised drone?).

So far, so Cronenbergy. There are even some of his trademark black laughs (when Tenser's invited to an inner-beauty pageant, it's suggested he enters 'Best Original Organ With No Known Function'). Mostly, the mood is one of hypnotic doom: heavy-legged, fatigued and feverish. The director is a genre in himself, but *Crimes Of The Future* identifies as a noir. It's in the swelling paranoia of Howard Shore's score. It's in the peeled, blistered interiors, as ruined as Chernobyl. And it's in Mortensen's stony, muted performance. Cowled like Death in Bergman's *The Seventh Seal*, groaning dialogue between furball coughs, Tenser slowly unpeels *Crimes*' conspiracy of a new plastic-eating species with the detached curiosity of a private eye.

This is where the film may prove divisive: not in the shock and gore, but its sparse, dramatic drive. Cronenberg is so consumed by the horror of us blindly walking into an eco-apocalypse he abandons plot for brooding. All doom. Little suspense.

Does that make the film any less impactful? Weirdly, no. Cronenberg is the Sandman of horror cinema: his nightmare images find an insidious way of worming into the subconscious. *Crimes Of The Future* is best approached not only with caution, but patience. Slowly, silently, like leaking gas, the film creeps up on you, and you wake up to what a tragic, devastating vision this is. Much of that is down to its haunting closing shot: is Tenser's smile one of ecstatic hope or destructive acceptance? The future of mankind seems to hangs on his lips, ambiguous and unspoken. If this is Cronenberg's swansong, as the mournful tone seems to suggest, his final body horror burrows deep, not under the flesh, but in the mind. **SIMON CROOK**

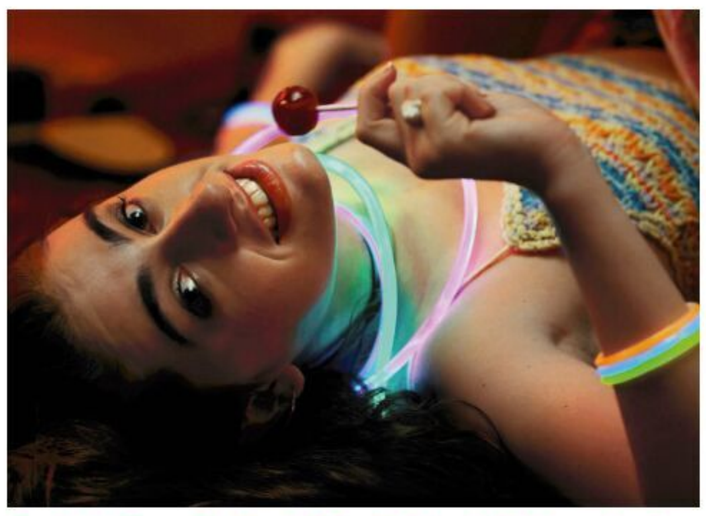
VERDICT **Hypnotic, maddening, pervy and disturbing. In other words, vintage Cronenberg. The doomy slow-burn won't be to all taste, but its abstract, feverish images are pure nightmare fuel.**



The party's over for Bee (Maria Bakalova) and Sophie (Amandla Stenberg).







Top to bottom: Fright night for the friends; Underwater love; Rachel Sennott as vacuous podcaster Alice.

[FILM]

BODIES BODIES BODIES

★★★★

OUT **9 SEPTEMBER** / CERT **15** / **94 MINS**

DIRECTOR Halina Reijn

CAST Amandla Stenberg, Maria Bakalova, Myha'la Herrold, Chase Sui Wonders, Rachel Sennott, Lee Pace, Pete Davidson

PLOT On a stormy night in a remote mansion, a group of über-wealthy friends play a seemingly harmless murder-in-the-dark game. Working-class newcomer Bee (Bakalova) can tell something is wrong — and when the first actual dead body shows up, everyone else realises, too.

IT'S A RISKY and yet somehow perfect move to use hit song '212' by Azealia Banks as the first major needle drop in *Bodies Bodies Bodies*. The singer has been at the heart of countless controversies over the years: physical altercations, online spats, accusations of racism, and some extremely misguided comments about President Putin. It's the kind of unacceptable behaviour that seems right at home in director Halina Reijn's smart and often delightfully insufferable slasher-comedy satire.

Here, everybody is annoying and nobody makes good decisions, which is what makes the violent chain of events unleashed upon these awful people just so damn fun to watch. It begins when recently sober Sophie (Amandla Stenberg) proudly brings her new girlfriend Bee (Maria Bakalova) to a party at the mansion of her longtime best friend David (Pete Davidson), introducing an ensemble that includes David's girlfriend Emma (Chase Sui Wonders), their headstrong friend Jordan (Myha'la Herrold), unbearable podcaster Alice (Rachel Sennott), and her latest Tinder catch, older vet Greg (Lee Pace). It's immediately uncomfortable, old friends quickly realising they just don't like each other anymore; a (horribly entertaining) night of petty grievances soon spirals out of control when actual death joins the growing list of gripes.

For anybody who's had the misfortune of spending any amount of time on the internet lately, this whodunnit feels fresh for the genre but painfully familiar tonally. Jokes often hinge on the subversion of social-media buzzwords, real issues mutated into online culture wars: gaslighting, triggering, silencing, safe spaces, seasonal depression and astrology-as-religion all get skewered. Or, rather, the social-media tendency to amplify said issues to the point that they define your entire personality. "Congratulations, you have a Twitter account!" David spits to Emma —and seemingly berating us, the audience, for having one too.

There are just as much, if not more, opportunities to laugh at these terrible rich kids as there are moments of horror. *Shiva Baby*'s Sennott gives a standout performance with her grating, desperate narcissism, but the whole group hit the delicate blend of detestability and incompetence almost perfectly. The tone might not work for everyone — but the extremes are what makes it so interesting.

To spend so much time with such wretched characters might feel like too much, if the film wasn't so well made. Reijn deploys violence with slick, stylistic flourishes, as glow-sticks and phone torches give the night a tension that's more skittish than eerie, and video-game composer Disasterpeace blends dirty pop and twinkling melodies to pump a constant discomfort into this never-silent night. Even though things will always be more horrible for them than for you, the skill of *Bodies Bodies Bodies* is to make it feel like somebody really could be waiting in the shadows once the noise has stopped. Being cancelled is bad — being murdered is worse. **ELLA KEMP**

VERDICT **Tense when it needs to be and awfully good fun throughout. Stupidity reigns supreme for these rich kids, but the filmmakers are smart enough to make *Bodies Bodies Bodies* stick the landing.**



PIGGY

★★★

OUT **7 OCTOBER** / CERT **18** / **100 MINS**
DIRECTOR Carlota Pereda
CAST Laura Galán, Carmen Machi, Claudia Salas

A plus-size teenager in a sunny Spanish village is brutally bullied by her peers, who call her 'Piggy'. When a serial killer rolls into town, things turn into an unlikely Bonnie-and-Clyde-style tale of bloody vengeance. But it's never quite so straightforward, with neat spins on horror/thriller tropes, and bullying in the first act that is genuinely distressing, built on the rocks of twitchy-curtained mistrust ("This town is full of spite," one character spits). Director Carlota Pereda adapts her own 2018 short film, and sometimes it shows, occasionally feeling like it's stalling for time. But the film is extremely well shot, with some sharp themes and a brave, soul-baring central performance from newcomer Laura Galán. **JN**

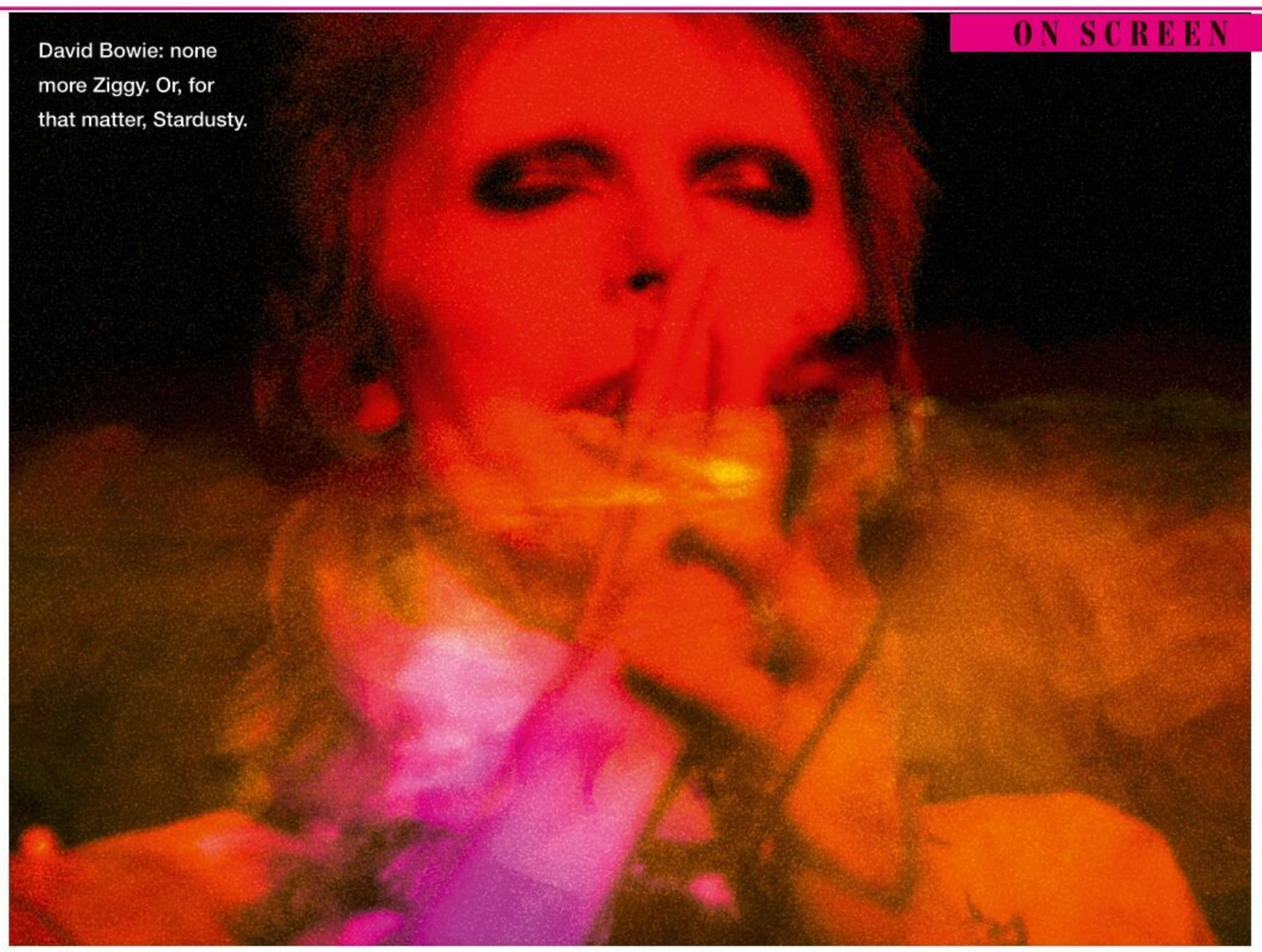


LUCK

★★★

OUT **NOW (APPLE TV+)** / CERT **PG** / **105 MINS**
DIRECTOR Peggy Holmes
CAST (VOICES) Eva Noblezada, Simon Pegg, Jane Fonda, Whoopi Goldberg

The first film produced at Skydance Animation under John Lasseter certainly borrows Pixar's visual style, talent and storytelling formula: it's another tale of a reality-adjacent fantasy world that controls some elemental force. Lonely orphan Sam (voiced by Eva Noblezada) is seemingly cursed with terrible luck; a chance encounter with a magical cat (Simon Pegg) leads her to the mystical Land of Luck, where they must track down a lucky penny. You're never more than five minutes away from a bit of exposition, but if you can keep up, there is some bright, lively visual comedy to be enjoyed. It doesn't come close to Pixar in its pomp, but has just enough to at least keep tiny people engaged. **JN**



David Bowie: none more Ziggy. Or, for that matter, Stardusty.

[FILM]

MOONAGE DAYDREAM

★★★★

OUT **17 SEPTEMBER**
CERT **TBC** / **140 MINS**

DIRECTOR Brett Morgen
CAST David Bowie

PLOT A new documentary about the life and work of the late, great pop pioneer David Bowie, created by *Kurt Cobain: Montage Of Heck* director Brett Morgen, with the backing of Bowie's estate and featuring a wealth of rare and never-before-seen footage.

WHILE DAVID BOWIE'S reputation as one of the greatest, most influential musicians of the 20th century remains unassailable, cynics might ask why we need another film about him. There have already been more than a dozen mostly made-for-TV documentaries profiling Brixton-born Bowie, as well as Gabriel Range's misfiring 2020 biopic *Stardust* and Todd Haynes' vivid, fictionalised version of Bowie and his glam-rock cohorts in *Velvet Goldmine*. Crucially, Range and Haynes weren't allowed to use Bowie's music. For *Moonage Daydream*, however, director Brett Morgen was granted unrestricted access to the Bowie catalogue and has made the most of this rare opportunity.

What music it is, and what magic the American filmmaker weaves with it. We leap between rare and, occasionally, never-released archive performances from Bowie's major tours. These include the Ziggy Stardust Tour during the early '70s, 1974's Diamond Dogs, and the Serious Moonlight excursion of 1983, which followed the spectacular success of 'Let's Dance', his biggest US hit. We gasp at stirring versions of some of the most anthemic art-pop earworms ever recorded, from 'Heroes' to 'Life On Mars' to 'Space Oddity'. Full-blooded on-stage renditions aside, there are fragments pumped up, teased and twisted into mash-ups by Morgen, who also writes, produces and edits — though the overall sonic tapestry is woven with the assistance of Bowie's long-time producer and key collaborator, Tony Visconti. Throughout, Bowie's narration (culled from various interviews) plays over the on-screen action, delivered in the London accent he never lost through all his persona ch-ch-changes.

The sound, then, is a delight, from the booming 'Hello Spaceboy' over the opening credits onwards, even if some might quibble at the omission of the odd banger (what, no 'Young Americans'?). Visually, immense creative energy has been invested in telling Bowie's story, with striking animated sequences dotted among the footage of him prowling the stage in bold glam finery. Searing reds, lush greens, popping purples and flaming oranges abound. There are snippets of Bowie-friendly delights like *Metropolis* and *The Red Shoes*, alongside films he starred in, such as *Labyrinth* and *Merry Christmas Mr. Lawrence*. One feels almost contractually obliged to describe it all as "kaleidoscopic".

Morgen's previous music docs, *Crossfire Hurricane* and *Kurt Cobain: Montage Of Heck*, offered revealing portraits, but *Moonage Daydream* represents a seismic leap forward in ambition. The primary focus on Bowie's '70s output means his fascinating late work is slightly neglected, while the close involvement of Bowie's estate prevents the inclusion of anything too controversial. Regardless, this is the definitive Bowie documentary, and appointment viewing for devotees and casual fans alike. **LOU THOMAS**

VERDICT **A spectacular documentary portrait of a great artist and extraordinary pop star. Despite a few omissions, it's a triumph of Sound And Vision, and essential for every David Bowie fan.**



Desert storm: Jessica Chastain and Ralph Fiennes as the privileged Jo and David.

[FILM]

THE FORGIVEN

★★

OUT **2 SEPTEMBER** / CERT **18** / **117 MINS**

DIRECTOR John Michael McDonagh
CAST Ralph Fiennes, Jessica Chastain, Matt Smith, Christopher Abbott

PLOT On their way to a lavish party in the desert, a wealthy husband (Fiennes) and wife (Chastain) hit a young Moroccan boy with their car and kill him. The festivities go on while the husband seeks his redemption.

THE TOXICITY OF white privilege and wealth seems to be having an on-screen moment. From Rian Johnson's upcoming *Glass Onion: A Knives Out Mystery* to HBO's comedy drama *The White Lotus* to Swedish provocateur Ruben Östlund's *Triangle Of Sadness*, stories about the misdeeds and bigotry of the upper classes have become a mainstay of our cultural landscape. The latest work from John Michael McDonagh (*The Guard*, *Calvary*) treads similar ground, but with mixed results.

In *The Forgiven*, the über-rich live out a bohemian fantasy at a castle, or *ksar*, in the Saharan desert owned by distinguished couple Richard (Matt Smith) and Dally (Caleb Landry-Jones). As guests arrive for the weekend festivities — among them, ageing English bachelors, an American financial analyst, and an array of scantily clad women — the stage appears to be set for a spiky whodunnit. Instead, there is little mystery over who is responsible for the death of Moroccan boy Driss on the dunes leading to the fortress. Drunk and argumentative, guest David (Ralph Fiennes) hits him at full speed with wife Jo (Jessica Chastain) in the passenger seat. They arrive at the party with the unexpected gift of Driss' limp body in the back.

McDonagh is clearly aiming for caustic satire in a relentlessly crass and damning portrait of the guests' responses to the killing as the party goes on, and of David's racism, misogyny and prejudice in a social circle that enables him. But when does such a portrayal stop being an effective critique and start feeling like an enactment of those very same issues? The characters know nothing of the Arab world except their own stereotypes, but do the filmmakers themselves? The veil of comedy in this film feels a little too thin, a little too stretched. Combined with a general lack of subtlety and a stiffness to the dialogue, there is a tiredness to the narrative which only grows more fatigued over time.

As David is sent to repent with Driss' father (Ismael Kanater) and helper Anouar (an excellent Saïd Taghmaoui) across the desert, Jo leans into all the treats of the luxe life — champagne, cocaine, even fellow guest Tom (Christopher Abbott). Her indifference towards her husband and the boy's death is clear, no matter what her crocodile tears hope to suggest. It's a less inventive role for Chastain to play, while Fiennes steps into the redemption arc with poise and depth. Still, what atonement is there to be found for these intolerable people, framed in pretty pictures by director of photography Larry Smith against stunning Moroccan vistas? The deliberate contrast between the ugliness of privilege and the beauty of the film's slick luxury aesthetic is frustratingly superficial and predictable — only adding to the blandness of the narrative. **CAITLIN QUINLAN**

VERDICT **The stiffness in the writing and general lack of subtlety leave this feeling underwhelming and overwrought. As a moral fable, *The Forgiven* offers little genuine critique.**



AFTER YANG

★★★★

OUT **22 SEPTEMBER** / CERT **TBC** / **96 MINS**
DIRECTOR Kogonada
CAST Colin Farrell, Justin H. Min, Malea Emma Tjandrawidjaja

A family of the future copes with the potential loss of their android helper in this gorgeously melancholic sci-fi drama, *Columbus* writer-director Kogonada using his premise to meditate on questions of memory, humanity, and nature versus nurture. If his vision is vaguely dystopian, it's also cosmetically appealing — a sleekly pancultural tomorrow of chic architectural design and warm gel lighting. At times serene to a fault, the ghost of a full-blown tearjerker gusts through *After Yang*. It's most clearly felt in Colin Farrell's subdued performance as a family man investigating the secret history of his "technosapien" — all while keeping his own wealth of feeling concealed behind a sleekly unperturbed exterior. **AAD**



ALL IS VANITY

★★★

OUT **16 SEPTEMBER** / CERT **TBC** / **72 MINS**
DIRECTOR Marcos Mereles
CAST Sid Phoenix, Yaseen Aroussi, Isabelle Bonfrer, Rosie Steel

A pompous photographer (Sid Phoenix) and his idealistic intern (Yaseen Aroussi) are joined by a model (Isabelle Bonfrer) and a make-up artist (Rosie Steel) in a London warehouse for a fashion shoot. When one of the crew disappears, director Marcos Mereles weaves a meta-textual mystery that unpacks like nesting dolls. Set in a single location, the loft is at once cavernous and claustrophobic, and mirrors scattered around speak to the multiplicity of its narratives. There was potential for a Charlie Kaufman-esque mind-bender centred around the artificiality of filmmaking, but its messaging is muddled and its Chekhov's guns go frustratingly un-fired; the result an unsatisfying puzzle weighed down by its cleverness. **IM**

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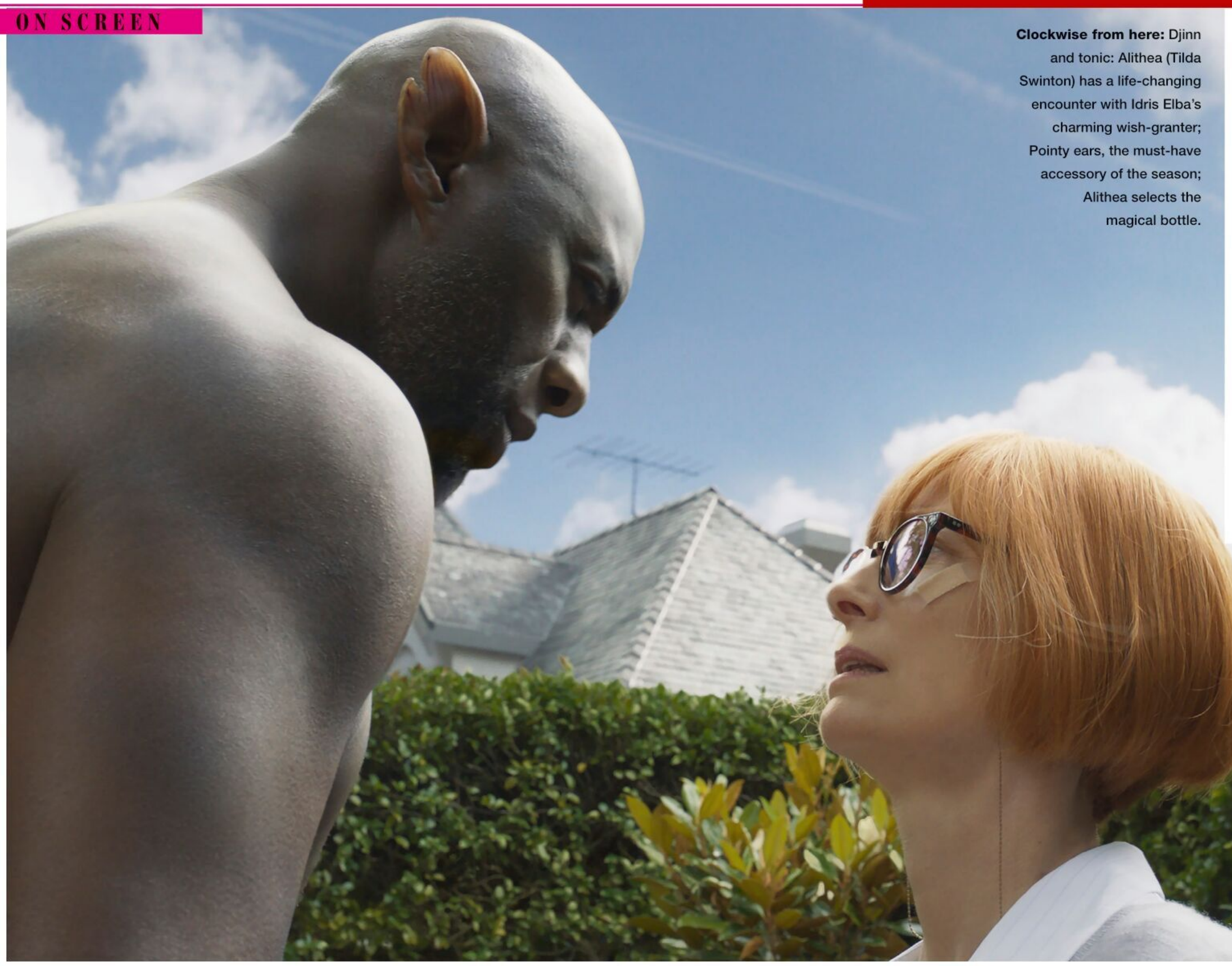


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Clockwise from here: Djinn and tonic: Alithea (Tilda Swinton) has a life-changing encounter with Idris Elba's charming wish-granter; Pointy ears, the must-have accessory of the season; Alithea selects the magical bottle.

[FILM]

THREE THOUSAND YEARS OF LONGING

★★★★

OUT **2 SEPTEMBER** /
CERT **TBC** / **108 MINS**

DIRECTOR George Miller
CAST Tilda Swinton, Idris Elba, Aamito Lagum, Burcu Gölgedar, Matteo Bocelli

PLOT During a work trip to Istanbul, narratology scholar Alithea Binnie (Swinton) accidentally unleashes a Djinn (Elba). In a bid to earn her trust, the Djinn begins to recount his life story, which spans continents, millennia and several doomed romances.

WHETHER HE'S SPINNING a tale of all-female rebellion in *Mad Max*: *Fury Road*, or drawing a prized porker into an urban animal underworld in *Babe: Pig In The City*, George Miller's narratives often reveal themselves to be something unexpected, under the veneer of something familiar. In *Three Thousand Years Of Longing*, the filmmaker's storytelling sensibilities are given a sprawling, colourful canvas upon which to weave an eccentric love story of epic proportions. It's a film that wears its heart on its sleeve; a love letter to storytelling, itself based on a short story by the Booker Prize-winning novelist A.S. Byatt. Told in the present day, it pivots between Tilda Swinton's narratology-loving narrator and Idris Elba's immortal, pointy-eared Djinn. She reflects on her experience of him; he recounts stories from his life in servitude.

Their paths align when Alithea (Swinton) — a solitary personality whose husband left her for another woman — picks out a blue-and-white glass bottle, in which the Djinn is captured, during her visit to Turkey. An electric-toothbrush-powered deep-clean of the artefact unleashes his giant form into her hotel room, after which Alithea's guardedness, paired with her knowledge of fantastical beings and their ability to deceive, provokes the Djinn to open up, in the hope that he will eventually convince her to grant him freedom.

Each subsequent segment is a contained, opulent fairy tale: the Djinn having his heart stomped on by the Queen of Sheba after Solomon arrives on the scene; scheming sultans and concubines in the Ottoman era; a beguiling, enslaved bride in the 19th century who craves endless knowledge while shackled to her marriage. In each chapter, the Djinn can't resist going beyond his duties, as desire or desperation (or both) inevitably lead him back into captivity. Back in the present day, the situation with Alithea proves harder to read, as her untrusting nature keeps him at arm's length.



Swinton, ever the chameleon, leans into the dress-up-box aspect of her character, conveying a primness and wariness from under her sharp, ginger bob while deploying a Northern twang which may feel familiar to those who have seen







her as the samurai-sword-wielding Scot in *The Dead Don't Die* or her dystopian, bespectacled second-in-command in *Snowpiercer*. Elba, meanwhile, deploys both charm and vulnerability in droves as the Djinn. It's a great role for him, seeing him move into refreshing new terrain as a wounded soul whose hope in humanity, although bashed, remains endlessly intact. As an actor whose masculinity is often mined for action or comedy (or Macavity in *Cats*, which exists in a category all of its own), it's enjoyable to see him play the romantic lead with a silkier, more slowed-down temperament than what he's used to bringing to the screen, even if the chemistry between the two leads is sometimes smothered by the theatricality of Swinton's character.

The film is, admittedly, sometimes hampered by its visual effects. The Djinn's stories are filled with intricate, greenscreen-generated set-pieces made up of jewel-bright palettes and CG vistas of faraway lands. With *Mad Max: Fury Road*'s cinematographer, John Seale, behind the camera, these sequences sometimes fall on the wrong side of excessive; your mileage may vary on whether that oversaturated approach will improve upon, or distract from, Elba's narration.

Yet Miller's imagination keeps *Three Thousand Years Of Longing* engaging. It's a relentlessly kinetic film that zips between millennia with boundless eccentricity and verve. In the Djinn's world, there are men who explode into waves of spiders, musical instruments that turn into living organisms as they're played, and an ensemble of concubines languishing against the plush interiors of a Turkish palace. It may not always translate into the kind of visual masterpiece that *Fury Road* became, but it's a spectacle nonetheless, one with idiosyncratic appeal and undeniable ambition. **BETH WEBB**

VERDICT **Elba's performance as a lonely Djinn with a bottomless reserve of charm, paired with Miller's unbridled energy, make this a modern fairy tale worth seeking out.**



Dane DiLiegro as the new — or rather, old — Predator in town.

[FILM]

PREY

★★★★

OUT **NOW (DISNEY+)**
CERT **15** / **99 MINS**

DIRECTOR Dan Trachtenberg
CAST Amber Midthunder, Dakota Beavers, Dane DiLiegro, Stormee Kipp, Michelle Thrush, Julian Black Antelope

PLOT To earn her stripes as a warrior, Comanche hunter Naru (Midthunder) must take the ritual of *kühtaamia* and bring down a particularly dangerous beast. Unbeknownst to her, though, she and her tribe are themselves being hunted, and by a creature more deadly by far.

IF YOU WANT an accurate representation of the state of masculinity circa 1987, look no further than John McTiernan's *Predator*. A platoon of oiled-up musclemen with biceps like bollards and Freudian überguns descend on Central America like some kind of WWE field trip — a Royal Rumble in the jungle. It's a big, fat testosterone milkshake of a movie that perfectly encapsulates the era. *Prey*, by contrast, takes the same basic set-up (warriors in the wilderness, hunted by an alien) but strips out the absurdity and neatly realigns the original with more modern sensibilities.

Six years after his directorial debut with the delightfully subversive *10 Cloverfield Lane*, Dan Trachtenberg is back in the spin-off business, his belated follow-up neatly sidestepping the legacies of previous sequels by turning back the clock 300 years to America's colonial past. Instead of Arnie at his Arniest, we have Amber Midthunder's Naru, a defiantly competent Comanche fighter who flatly rejects her people's notion of a woman's role.

Electrifying every scene, Midthunder is a ball of elemental fury, imbuing Naru with shatterproof resolve and ruthless pragmatism — a meeting between barbed saw-blade and French colonialist's leg is chillingly matter-of-fact — yet Patrick Aison's economical script never robs her of empathy, nor suggests a need to adopt masculine traits in order to outwit and out-fight any man who gets in her way. Naru may lack the no-neck brawn of Dutch's crew, but she's wiry and ferret-quick, efficiently dispatching quarry both four-legged and two with bow, blade and tomahawk-on-a-rope (genius) in a symphony of choreographed mayhem that wouldn't look out of place in *John Wick: Chapter 4*. Consistently underestimated, she's even marginalised by the Predator, who refuses to acknowledge the hunting party's lone female, at one point literally unable to see her as it casts about for worthy prey. The gender commentary may not be subtle, but it is stark and to the point.

McTiernan's original was a showpiece for slow-burn tension, tapping into the claustrophobic terror of an enemy unseen. Trachtenberg, though, is all too aware that the bulk of his audience has been here before. So *Prey* plays to the gallery, never coy about what's waiting in the trees. This costs the film some of the original's creeping dread, but the Predator's full, uncloaked reveal (doused in ursine blood) shocks with a startling, sinister new look: one even uglier motherfucker.

With its ferocious heroine, authentic period setting, and a bloody string of inventive action beats, Trachtenberg's film breathes new life into a long-deflated series. At once pleasantly familiar and delightfully fresh, this is classic *Predator* artfully rejigged for 2022 — a shining example of how to take something old and make it new again. **JAMES DYER**

VERDICT **Effortlessly the best *Predator* movie since the original, *Prey* proves that, against all expectation, there's life in the franchise yet, not to mention a thrilling new lead in Amber Midthunder.**

SHOWMASTERS PRESENTS

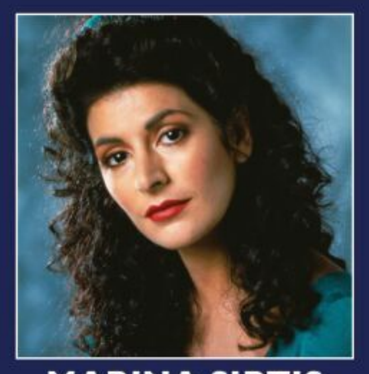
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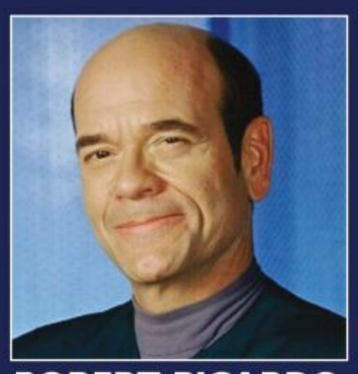
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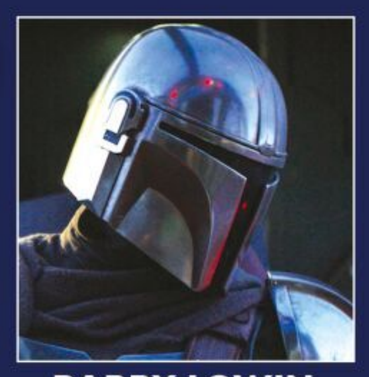
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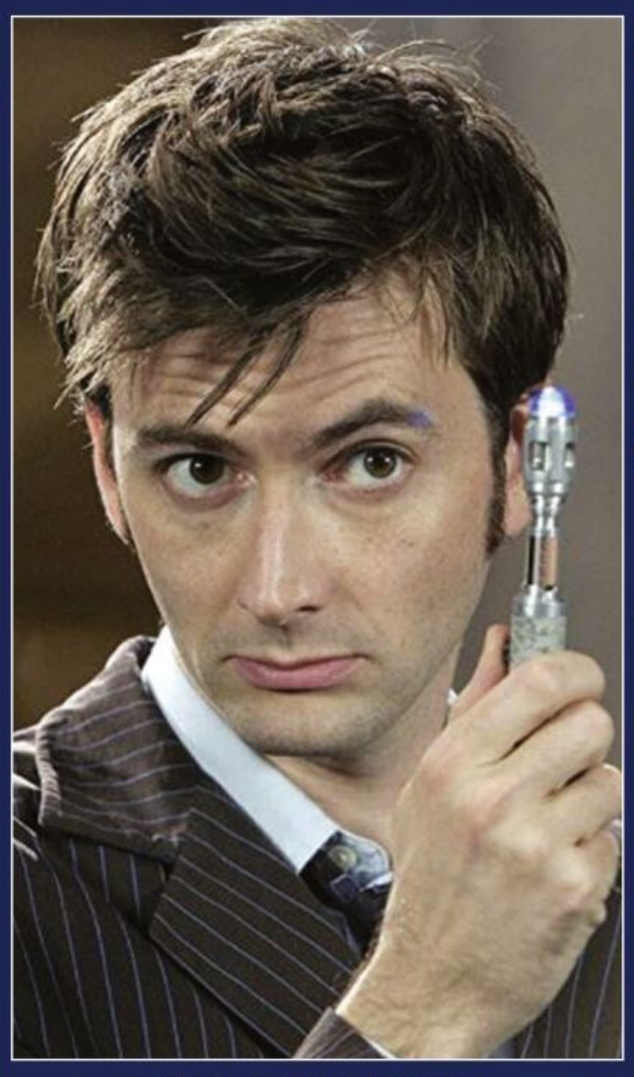
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STUNTS - MANDALORIAN



ETHAN PHILLIPS
STAR TREK



CLARK GREGG
AGENTS OF S.H.I.E.L.D
MARVEL MOVIES



DAVID TENNANT
DOCTOR WHO, GOOD OMENS
STAGED, BROADCHURCH



MARK PELLEGRINO
LOST, SUPERNATURAL
DEXTER



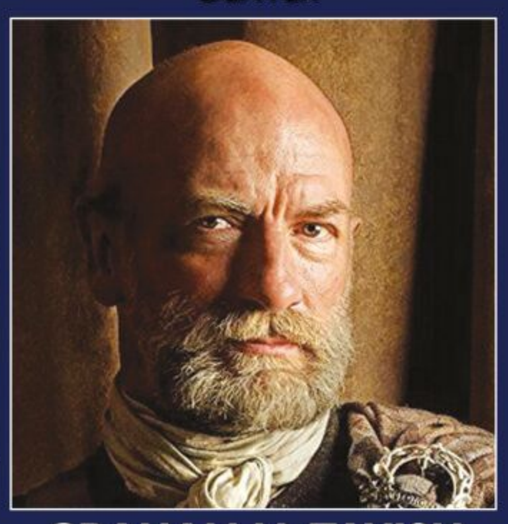
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STUNTS - OBI-WAN KENOBI



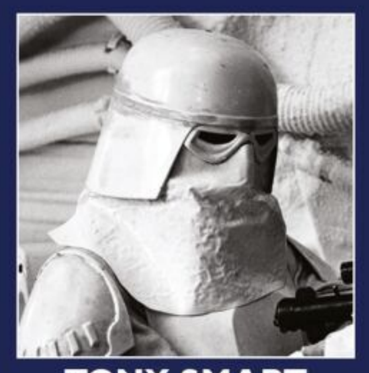
SYLVESTER McCOY
DOCTOR WHO



IAN DE CAESTECKER
AGENTS OF S.H.I.E.L.D



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IT IS IN US ALL

★★

OUT **23 SEPTEMBER** / CERT **15** / **92 MINS**
DIRECTOR Antonia Campbell-Hughes
CAST Cosmo Jarvis, Rhys Mannion, Claes Bang

After his powerhouse performance in *Calm With Horses*, Cosmo Jarvis returns to Ireland in Antonia Campbell-Hughes' feature-directing debut, *It Is In Us All*. Jarvis plays Hamish Considine — the repressed son of wealthy, distant father Jack (Claes Bang) — who is involved in a violent car crash on the way to his late aunt's estate in Donegal. Hamish is uptight and abrasive, so Jarvis' wild, simmering on-screen energy is more restrained than usual. The stark, still cinematography is beautiful, and the themes of self-destruction and small-town despair are intriguing, but sadly the script is vastly underdeveloped. This renders the film slight and something of a slog, but it is at least a positive indication of Campbell-Hughes' potential behind the camera. **SB**



STRAWBERRY MANSION

★★★

OUT **16 SEPTEMBER** / CERT **12A** / **91 MINS**
DIRECTORS Kentucker Audley, Albert Birney
CAST Kentucker Audley, Grace Glowicki, Penny Fuller, Reed Birney

It's 2035, and James Preble (played by co-director Kentucker Audley) is a taxman, tasked with auditing people's uploaded dreams. His lonely existence could do with some magic and, well, he gets it, when he's assigned to investigate the elderly Bella Isadora (Penny Fuller). Stepping inside her dreams, he meets her younger incarnation (Grace Glowicki), and a surreal, subconscious romance blossoms. The filmmakers are clearly in thrall to the likes of Charlie Kaufman, Michel Gondry and David Lynch, but *Strawberry Mansion* doesn't quite get there — it's a little too kooky (and frankly too cheap) to manage it. However, this is a gentle, sweet film, which is inventive and ambitious enough to bust out of its budget. And that's charming in itself. **AG**



SPEAK NO EVIL

★★★★

OUT **16 SEPTEMBER (SHUDDER)** / CERT **TBC** / **97 MINS**
DIRECTOR Christian Tafdrup
CAST Morten Burian, Sidsel Siem Koch, Fedja van Huêt, Karina Smulders

A Danish family goes on holiday with a Dutch couple they barely know, and the pretence of happy families soon gives way to unbearable tension. *Speak No Evil* initially plays like a Ruben Östlund film — as with *Force Majeure*, it's a dark comedy of European middle-class manners and slowly ratcheting awkwardness. But a portentous score, that horror-laden title, and dialogue like, "What's the worst that can happen?" teases something much, much darker. An arthouse take on a genre template, it doesn't show its cards until the final act, but when it does... Bloody hell. The horror, once begun, is short, sharp and simple, but nasty enough to shock even the toughest audience. A slow-burn bear-trap of a film. **JN**



THE RETALIATORS

★★

OUT **14 SEPTEMBER** / CERT **TBC** / **95 MINS**
DIRECTORS Samuel Gonzalez Jr., Bridget Smith
CAST Michael Lombardi, Marc Menchaca, Joseph Gatt

Films like *The Retaliators* rarely escape the bargain bin; what may have lifted this one into a cinema release is the slew of nu-metal rock-star cameos it boasts. Alas, stunt-casting members of the band Five Finger Death Punch as a biker gang does not a good film make. Cobbling together an uneven mish-mash of genres (a slasher horror, a revenge thriller, a crime drama, a meditation on grief... plus paedophile zombies?), it promises schlocky fun but — at least until the *Evil Dead*-aspiring final act — delivers only boring, B-movie mediocrity. If you've ever wanted to see Papa Roach's Jacoby Shaddix play a murderous rapist, or Mötley Crüe's Tommy Lee play a strip-club DJ, this is the movie for you. For the rest of us, there's little to recommend here. **JN**



FUNNY PAGES

★★★★

OUT **16 SEPTEMBER** / CERT **TBC** / **86 MINS**
DIRECTOR Owen Kline
CAST Daniel Zolghadri, Matthew Maher, Miles Emanuel

No capes in this comic-book adaptation — instead, an excruciating, frantic and very funny tale about an arrogant, adolescent cartoonist and an infinite saga of horrendous decisions. A fan of gross-out comics, teenager Robert (Daniel Zolghadri) hurtles into a life of squalor, in the hopes of crafting art out of the pain. Robert's world is a clammy, puerile place filled with characters lifted from his beloved pages; their wild curls, oily comb-overs and wide, bouncing eyes matching his caricatured drawing style. Although occasionally more like a set of sketches than a fully shaded story, Robert's odyssey of sweat, ink and self-destructive pretentiousness is both cartoonish and compelling. One of the most intriguing comic-book movies of the year. **JC**

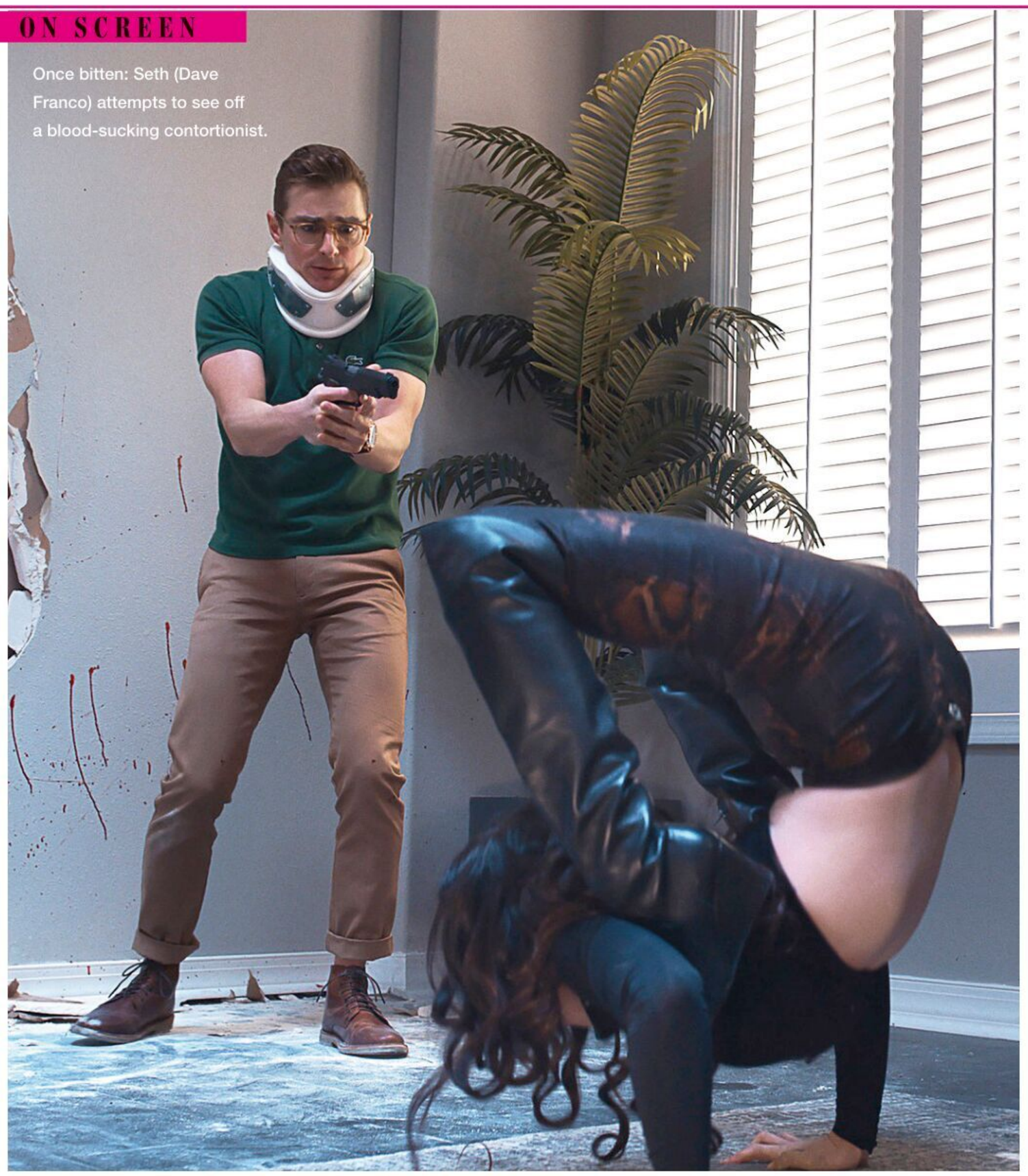


LAAL SINGH CHADDHA

★★★

OUT **NOW** / CERT **12A** / **159 MINS**
DIRECTOR Advait Chandan
CAST Aamir Khan, Kareena Kapoor, Mona Singh

Advait Chandan's Hindi-language remake of *Forrest Gump* is a strange, slightly surreal experience. Less a remake, in places it resembles a Gus Van Sant-esque facsimile of Robert Zemeckis' 1994 Oscar-winner. But it is not without its charms: warmly played, sincerely made and with the odd interesting tweak to the template. Shifted from the '50s to the '70s, the premise remains the same — a check-shirted simpleton (Aamir Khan) glides through the tumult of (Indian) history while besotted with a childhood love (Kareena Kapoor) — but so do much of the dialogue, motifs (a white feather!), set-pieces and imagery. Khan makes for a winning, gentle presence, but ultimately *Laal Singh Chaddha* feels like the infamous box of chocolates — except you know *exactly* what you're gonna get. **IF**



Once bitten: Seth (Dave Franco) attempts to see off a blood-sucking contortionist.







Top to bottom: Jamie Foxx and Snoop Dogg; The big fangs theory: Karla Souza as Audrey; Vampire slayers, 2022 style.

[FILM]

DAY SHIFT

★★★

OUT **NOW (NETFLIX)** / CERT **18** / **113 MINS**

DIRECTOR J. J. Perry
CAST Jamie Foxx, Dave Franco, Snoop Dogg, Natasha Liu Bordizzo, Meagan Good, Scott Adkins

PLOT Bud Jablonski (Foxx) works as a freelance vampire-hunter in the San Fernando Valley. When his estranged wife (Good) demands money for their daughter's braces, he is forced to team up with union rep Seth (Franco) to earn the big bucks.

WHEN YOU THINK "vampire-hunter", what's the first thing that comes to mind? Depending on your vintage, it might be Van Helsing, Blade, Buffy, or, erm, Abraham Lincoln. This latest Netflix entry hopes to add a Los Angeles pool-cleaner to that storied company; while it's unlikely to be more than a footnote to the legacy of Bram Stoker, it's a likeable enough addition to the garlic-and-wooden-stakes canon.

As it turns out, rather than attempting to ape blood-sucking staples, the elevator pitch for *Day Shift* seems to have been: "*Men In Black*, but with vampires." This is an action-comedy very much in the mould of Barry Sonnenfeld's seminal 1997 sci-fi: a secret bureaucratic society policing fantasy creatures; a wise-cracking tone with effects-heavy action; and a rookie-versus-old-timer buddy dynamic.

Here, Jamie Foxx is in the Tommy Lee Jones role, playing Bud, an experienced old hat who doesn't always play by the rules. He's essentially a working stiff, given a deadline by his ex-wife: three days to earn ten grand for tuition and dental braces, or she and their daughter move to Florida. As vampire fangs are his main source of income, he's forced to go legit, teaming up with Dave Franco's squeamishly uptight, pescatarian desk-jockey Seth. It's hardly a dynamic we've never seen before — something even the filmmakers realise, making a sly nod to Foxx's previous buddy-movie experience in *Miami Vice* — but the two actors at least share an easy chemistry. If few of the jokes land especially hard — this is not exactly a comedy to guffaw at — at least the actors we're watching are comfortably charismatic.

Where it excels, however, is the action. This is the directorial debut of J. J. Perry, the latest stuntman from the 87eleven stable to cross over into directing, and his experience with wirework and practical effects pays dividends here, the film full of kinetic camerawork, acrobatic stunts and inventive kills. It opens with a physics-defying fight with a sweet old lady who turns out to be an important demon, and keeps the pace up — one fight achieves Arnold Schwarzenegger's long-held dream for *Commando* of ripping a man's arm off and then beating him to death with it. Another sees a ludicrously elaborate gun-reload sequence, deftly executed by Sutton Coldfield's finest, Scott Adkins. Also, Snoop Dogg shows up at one point, dressed as a cowboy, firing a chain gun named 'Big Bertha' — all while smoking a massive doobie.

It's a lot of mildly-guilty-pleasure fun. And even if the script can't quite compete with the action on screen, it at least manages to pepper in some worldbuilding — there are apparently five species of vampires: Southern, Easter, Spider, Uber and Juvenile, all served by human Familiars. There is also some ingenious weaponry with which to fight them (garlic grenades, anyone?). The filmmaking can sometimes feel first-base (the opening sequence, introducing California's San Fernando Valley, features palm trees and oversaturated skies, set to 2Pac's 'California Love' — as obvious as choices come). But when it pops, *Day Shift* has some sharp teeth on it. **JOHN NUGENT**

VERDICT **The action is well-shot, and the buddy dynamic is fun. There's plenty here that's familiar, but it's actually not a terrible way to spend a couple of hours with your Familiar.**



ORPHAN: FIRST KILL

★★★

OUT **NOW** / CERT **15** / **98 MINS**
DIRECTOR William Brent Bell
CAST Isabelle Fuhrman, Julia Stiles, Rossif Sutherland

This delayed follow-up to 2009's *Orphan* is a better, weirder film. CGI, body-doubling and trick angles let the indispensible but now grown-up Isabelle Fuhrman reprise her role as Leena, a 30-year-old homicidal maniac whose growth-arresting medical condition allows her to pass for a child. Drawing from documentary *The Imposter*, *Orphan: First Kill* has the waif pose as the missing daughter of a rich family. And evoking Hammer's *Paranoiac*, the ostensible villain turns detective as Leena wonders why some members of her new family eagerly accept her while others seethe. It defaults to the murder-every-15-minutes horror sequel template, but Fuhrman's calm malice remains fresh. Clever, unpredictable and gruesome. **KN**



THE SCORE

★★★

OUT **9 SEPTEMBER** / CERT **15** / **100 MINS**
DIRECTOR Malachi Smyth
CAST Will Poulter, Naomi Ackie, Johnny Flynn

Here is a curious concept: a jukebox musical of previously released Johnny Flynn songs, also starring Johnny Flynn. And while it will take your brain a bit of calibrating to reconcile this film's two sides — a stagey presentation of folk songs, melded with a gritty West Country crime-thriller — it just about works. The musician-turned-actor plays a self-confessed "nobody", plotting a big deal with big criminals; Will Poulter is the "nobody's gopher". An unlikely romance with Naomi Ackie's Gloria emerges in a roadside caff, where the entire film is set, leaving things feeling dramatically inert. But like the best musicals, Flynn's arresting songs elevate everything: speaking intangibles that the characters can't express in words. **JN**



The *Pulp Fiction* prop sale had turned nasty.

[FILM]

BULLET TRAIN

★★★

OUT **NOW** / CERT **15** / **126 MINS**

DIRECTOR David Leitch
CAST Brad Pitt, Aaron Taylor-Johnson, Brian Tyree Henry, Joey King, Sandra Bullock, Zazie Beetz

PLOT Assassin 'Ladybug' (Pitt) is sent by his handler (Bullock) on a seemingly simple mission: get on a Japanese Shinkansen bullet train, retrieve a briefcase, and get off at the next stop. Except, the train is packed with other assassins — including 'Tangerine' (Taylor-Johnson), 'Lemon' (Henry), 'The Wolf' (Bad Bunny) and 'Hornet' (Beetz) — tangled in a web of vengeful violence.

WHEN *JOHN WICK*'S co-director boards a film about a high-speed train packed with assassins, certain things are expected. Bullet-spraying brawls? Check. Creatively choreographed set-pieces, shot with precision and clarity? Check. A charismatic A-lister's action comeback? Check. But if *Bullet Train*'s set-up sounds like '*John Wick* on rails', David Leitch's latest surprisingly isn't that movie — instead, it continues his post-*Wick* trajectory into bigger, splashier, more cartoonish territory.

Following *Deadpool 2* and *Fast & Furious: Hobbs & Shaw*, Leitch's tongue remains lodged firmly in his cheek for a screwball summer movie with samurai swords and psycho killers — an ultraviolent farce. Like its transportation namesake, *Bullet Train* is fast, slick, and shiny — but this is less intent on going directly from A to B than it is looping back around on itself in knots of coincidences and contrivances, as a cavalcade of contract killers clash in the carriages. Think *Kill Bill Vol. 1* filtered through early Guy Ritchie, both for better and worse.

Locked neatly into that loose, aloof rhythm is Brad Pitt as 'Ladybug', a hired gun attempting to practice mindfulness while (ah-ah-ah-ah) stayin' alive (the film opens with a Japanese-language cover of that very Bee Gees song). But his seemingly simple job — hop on board, grab a silver briefcase, hop off — is not so straightforward, and he's soon beset by other hit-people with their own overlapping agendas. Among them, Cockney duo Tangerine (Brian Tyree Henry, his accent veering between stellar and shaky) and Lemon (Aaron Taylor-Johnson, supremely enjoyable), whose bickering conveys a genuine brotherhood; Joey King's The Prince, who uses her youthful appearance as a weapon (among other *actual* weapons); Bad Bunny's The Wolf, desperate for vengeance; and Andrew Koji's Yuichi, forced into action when his son's life is threatened. *Bullet Train*'s primary focus is setting them on criss-crossing tracks, flashing backwards and forwards to tell the story of their interlinked grievances as the bodies pile high.

The results are frequently fun, especially whenever Pitt is on screen – blow-drying his hair with a tricked-out Japanese toilet, repeating his therapy mantras ("Hurt people hurt people"), and silently scuffling with Lemon in the quiet carriage. His chemistry, too, with Sandra Bullock's largely-offscreen handler is charming.

What it isn't, in any way, is deep. Style over substance feels like the whole point here (and the style itself is substantial), but *Bullet Train* only ever operates on a surface level — the screenplay's explorations of surrendering to fate versus attempting to seize control feel shallow at best. Plus, its appropriation of Japanese culture feels uncomfortably tokenistic, revelling in East Asian iconography while presenting a sprawling cast of largely non-Asian actors, wasting Karen Fukuhara and Masi Oka in bit-parts, and sidelining legends like Hiroyuki Sanada (stuck speaking in 'Wise Old Man' tropes when he does enter the film).

Expect a ride and nothing more, though, and *Bullet Train* largely delivers — its excesses sometimes smug (an Engelbert Humperdinck murder-montage is overplayed), sometimes sublime (a bottle of water and a venomous snake get their own intro-montages). Worth a one-way ticket, if not a return journey. **BEN TRAVIS**

VERDICT **The action is first-class, and Brad Pitt and Aaron Taylor-Johnson are having a blast — but with all that hyperactive style and cartoonish violence, you'll be ready to disembark by its final destination.**



[TV]

HOUSE OF THE DRAGON

★★★

OUT **NOW (SKY ATLANTIC/NOW)**
EPISODES VIEWED **6 OF 10**

SHOWRUNNERS Ryan J. Condal, Miguel Sapochnik
CAST Paddy Considine, Emma D'Arcy, Milly Alcock, Matt Smith, Olivia Cooke, Emily Carey, Rhys Ifans, Steve Toussaint

PLOT In Westeros, almost two centuries before the time of Daenerys, King Viserys I Targaryen (Considine) sits on the Iron Throne. When his brother Daemon (Smith) is disinherited, Viserys' daughter, Rhaenyra (Alcock/D'Arcy), is made heir. But there are other claims to the throne — and war looms.

PREQUELS ARE HARD. (Just ask George Lucas.) To make one work, you have to escape the shadow of the original, find stakes and tension in a story to which everyone ultimately knows the ending, and — if you're *House Of The Dragon* — follow up a show like *Game Of Thrones*, which was, almost simultaneously, the most-acclaimed and least-acclaimed television series of all time. HBO's lavish fantasy adaptation of George R.R. Martin's books ended in 2019 on such a sour note among some quarters that it's easy to forget it was, at its peak, as good as TV has ever been: teeming with richly sketched political intrigue, complex characters, historical allegory and big-budget fantasy spectacle.

In this first spin-off show, much is different, and much is familiar. There is still gruesome violence, well-placed swearing, and abundant orgies. The peroxide wigs still look resolutely like wigs. There are whispers, too, of a "Great Winter" and the "Prince That Was Promised", along with occasional appearances from Baratheons, Starks and Lannisters — hints of players in the game to come. Sensibly, though, fan service is not laid on too thick, the writers perhaps conscious of previous criticism. This is emphatically a Targaryen story, the lens intimately trained on one family, slowly tearing itself apart.

That is both an asset and a flaw. There is a focus to the storytelling that was never there in the original show: a single noble house, a single question being answered — *Succession*, if Logan Roy rode dragons — and it gives the series purpose and drive. It's all heading in one direction: the Targaryen civil war, until now only recited as a dry fictional history in Martin's *Fire And Blood*.

But that comes at the cost of texture. There are endless discussions of heirs, endless small council squabbles, endless meetings-that-could-







Clockwise from left: Daemon (Matt Smith) inspects a dragon's egg; The King and I: Milly Alcock plays Princess Rhaenyra; Dracarys!; Paddy Considine as King Viserys Targaryen.

have-been-ravens. The writing so far lacks the sparkle of *Thrones*' most profound moments: there is no equivalent to the witty drinking-and-knowing-things of Tyrion, no petty scheming of Littlefinger's level, no revealing character moments as startling as Robert and Cersei finally having an honest conversation.

It moves at such a whip — the initial episodes span several years — and with such dense politicking that it's sometimes hard to see the character woods for the plot-heavy trees. Most intriguing among the ensemble is Matt Smith, tremendous as a petulant, hissable villain sharing more than a few traits with the future Prince Joffrey, though Smith finds shreds of humanity to add to the bloodthirsty Targaryen supremacism. Milly Alcock and Emma D'Arcy are excellent, too, sharing the role of Rhaenyra, who, like Daenerys before her, grapples with what it means to be a woman in a violently patriarchal world. "Childbirth is our battlefield," Rhaenyra is told by her mother, and indeed, there are three shockingly brutal births in the first six hours, only one of which ends well. As much as it purports to revere them, this franchise's treatment of female characters still feels like a regular blind spot.

At least the stakes feel grand and epic. "This is not a trivial matter," Paddy Considine's Viserys intones gravely, and it looks every penny of the reported $150-200 million budget, with a muscularly cinematic battle almost every other hour; a lavish royal wedding that longtime viewers will be right to mistrust; and no scrimping on dragons, either. *Thrones* took a whole season to introduce its signature beasts; its sister show takes just three minutes. Dragons here are a regular sight in Westeros skies, which makes warfare play very differently; the goalpasts inevitably move when you have a dozen giant flying weapons of mass destruction on your side. When utilised best, such as the fiery opening to Episode 3, we're reminded of the terrible power they still summon: not cheesy fantasy fluff, but true shock and awe.

For all its po-faced plotting, this show has plenty going for it. A decade time-jump in episode six, recasting several characters, gives the series a new energy; D'Arcy and Olivia Cooke (as the troubled Queen Alicent Hightower) breathe new dimensions into their aged-up characters, and the sudden switch-up suggests a show unafraid to take risks. This is a prequel that could surprise us yet. But to even skirt the heights of *Thrones*' best work, it has an uphill dragon ride ahead. **JOHN NUGENT**

VERDICT ***House Of The Dragon*** **has a lot to prove, and it makes an admirable attempt in its first few episodes. But for better and for worse, it has not escaped the shadow of its predecessor — at least, not yet.**



Going green: Hulk (Mark Ruffalo) and She-Hulk (Tatiana Maslany).

[TV]

SHE-HULK: ATTORNEY AT LAW

★★★★

OUT **NOW (DISNEY+)** /
EPISODES VIEWED **4 OF 9**

SHOWRUNNER Jessica Gao
CAST Tatiana Maslany, Mark Ruffalo, Tim Roth, Ginger Gonzaga, Jameela Jamil

PLOT When lawyer Jennifer Walters (Maslany) is involved in a car crash, blood from her cousin Bruce (Ruffalo) enters her bloodstream, and she develops his ability to transform into a Hulk. But, trying to keep her green side hidden, she returns to work as head of a Superhuman Law Division.

WHAT IS THE responsibility of those with powers? How can superhumans be held to account for their actions? And, most importantly, was Steve Rogers a virgin? These are all questions that new MCU show *She-Hulk* attempts to answer — and it does so, in style.

The first episode sets up the premise at breakneck speed. Jennifer Walters (Tatiana Maslany) is a lawyer, and an excellent one at that. With her first fourth-wall break — taken directly from the comics, delivered here in a brilliantly meta, impactfully intermittent way — we flash back to the incident where she receives her powers, and then the trip she takes to Bruce's (Mark Ruffalo) remote Mexican lab to learn how to manage them.

Bruce's main priority is teaching Jennifer how to regulate her emotions and impart his years of wisdom learned about being the Hulk. However, it turns out she's surprisingly adept at keeping her cool and managing her transformation, cannily pointing out that, as a woman who simply exists in the world, anger and fear are things she already deals with far more than he does. While this can feel a little on the nose, the core idea of Jennifer being more equipped to deal with her inner big-green-rage-monster is true-to-life and backed up by her daily experiences — from her misogynist co-worker to some terrible first dates and a variety of unwanted approaches from men — which prevents the character from feeling like a carbon copy of her cousin.

Ruffalo is great as always, as is his and Maslany's familial chemistry, and Ginger Gonzaga is a delight as Jennifer's BFF-slash-paralegal Nikki — but the star is, of course, Tatiana Maslany herself. She's dripping with charisma and comedic timing, which come through just as clearly when in Hulk form, indicating the strength of Maslany's mo-cap performance. And about that CGI — much maligned when the show's first trailer dropped, Jennifer's gigantic green persona looks, while iffy at times, *far* better overall here. The biggest question about her Hulk appearance isn't the quality of her chartreuse skin — it's why her monstrous inner self comes complete with an intense smokey-eye and blow-dry.

Once we get into the show proper, *She-Hulk* really hits its stride. This is an MCU series that really embraces the medium — four episodes in, it starts leaning into a case-of-the-week format, with Jennifer and the Superhuman Law Division handling misdemeanours of the mystically powered and magically trained. There are threads linking each episode — this is not a full-blown procedural — but *She-Hulk*'s ability to introduce new stories and characters that expand the Marvel world in a fun, small-scale way is incredibly promising. Though we know more *Loki* is coming, *She-Hulk* — free, for now, from the shackles of feeding into the larger Multiverse saga — feels like Marvel's first real opportunity at a show that could run and run for multiple seasons. **SOPHIE BUTCHER**

VERDICT **Laugh-out-loud funny, packed with interesting themes, and just an all-round good time, *She-Hulk* breaks new ground for Marvel's TV shows — and is one of their best small-screen offerings yet.**









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Black comedy: sisters are doing it for themselves in Sharon Horgan's new show.

[TV]

BAD SISTERS

★★★★

OUT **NOW (APPLE TV+)** / EPISODES VIEWED **10 OF 10**

SHOWRUNNER Sharon Horgan
CAST Sharon Horgan, Anne-Marie Duff, Sarah Greene, Eva Birthistle, Eve Hewson, Claes Bang, Brian Gleeson, Daryl McCormack

PLOT Nobody liked John Paul (Bang): he made life a misery for his wife, Grace (Duff), and was always arguing with her sisters. After his death, it seems everything is finally okay, but the men due to pay out on his life insurance suspect murder — and they think Grace's sisters may be hiding something.

A DISTRAUGHT WIDOW tenderly strokes the hair of her newly dead husband, then urgently tries to hide his sudden, rigor mortis-induced erection before the funeral guests arrive. That opening moment gives you the exact tone of Sharon Horgan's latest. Like most Horgan creations, *Bad Sisters* has the bones of a serious drama, veiled in dark, acutely observed comedy.

The widow is Grace (Anne-Marie Duff); the tumescent corpse John Paul (Claes Bang), a man who died relatively young, but most would say not before time. As Grace's family gathers for the funeral, it quickly becomes clear that John Paul's death was probably not an accident, and her sisters seem to be hiding quite a lot of secrets. Across two timelines, one beginning six months before John Paul's death, the other immediately after, we learn of the many reasons people wanted the man dead and multiple bungled attempts to kill him.

There is a lot going on in the plot of this show, based on the Belgian series *Clan*, but it's written so tightly, and acted so exceptionally, it never feels bogged down in exposition. Grace's sisters are a close-knit group: matriarchal Eva (Horgan), who raised the younger ones after the death of their parents; sensible but bored Ursula (Eva Birthistle); impetuous Bibi (Sarah Greene); and chaotic youngest Becka (Eve Hewson). Grace has drifted from the group, her personality fading under John Paul's constant, crushing emotional abuse. When Bibi casually suggests the only way to help Grace is to kill John Paul, the others, who all have extra reasons for wanting him dead, think the idea might have merit. Two brothers (Brian Gleeson and Daryl McCormack), whose company will have to pay out on John Paul's life insurance policy, are determined to prove he was murdered and save themselves from bankruptcy.

Initially it seems like there can't be that much to the story — the sisters wanted John Paul dead and got their wish — but over the ten episodes, the family story unfolds in surprising ways. Horgan's characters are written with an honest, sympathetic sense of chaos. The sisters are not outwardly 'good' people. They cheat on kind spouses, lie, steal and, importantly, plot a man's death, but Horgan makes us feel for them because they're doing the best they can. Much of the comedy comes from deep-rooted sibling dynamics that will always out, causing bickering and teasing even when you're trying to blow up a man in his holiday cabin. The scheming can get a bit silly, but the silliness is always reined in.

After about five minutes in the company of John Paul, you're willing the sisters to succeed. He is *awful*. Bang gives him all the smug self-confidence he gave Dracula, but with the charm extracted and extra bursts of terrifying callousness. Finding out just how he got his comeuppance, and all the ways he had it coming, makes for a comedy-drama with a black but surprisingly warm heart. **OLLY RICHARDS**

VERDICT One of Horgan's best, *Bad Sisters* manages to be both a clever murder-mystery and a hilarious farcical comedy, played by an absolutely killer cast.

ON SCREEN CHECKLIST

Your at-a-glance view of this month's reviews



FILM

OUT NOW

BULLET TRAIN	★★★	P43
DAY SHIFT	★★★	P42
LAAL SINGH CHADDHA	★★★	P41
LUCK	★★★	P35
ORPHAN: FIRST KILL	★★★	P43
PREY (ABOVE)	★★★★	P39

2 SEPTEMBER

THE FORGIVEN	★★	P36
THREE THOUSAND YEARS OF LONGING	★★★★	P38

9 SEPTEMBER

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CRIMES OF THE FUTURE	★★★★	P32
THE SCORE	★★★	P43

14 SEPTEMBER

THE RETALIATORS	★★	P41

16 SEPTEMBER

ALL IS VANITY	★★★	P36
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22 SEPTEMBER

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23 SEPTEMBER

IT IS IN US ALL	★★	P41

7 OCTOBER

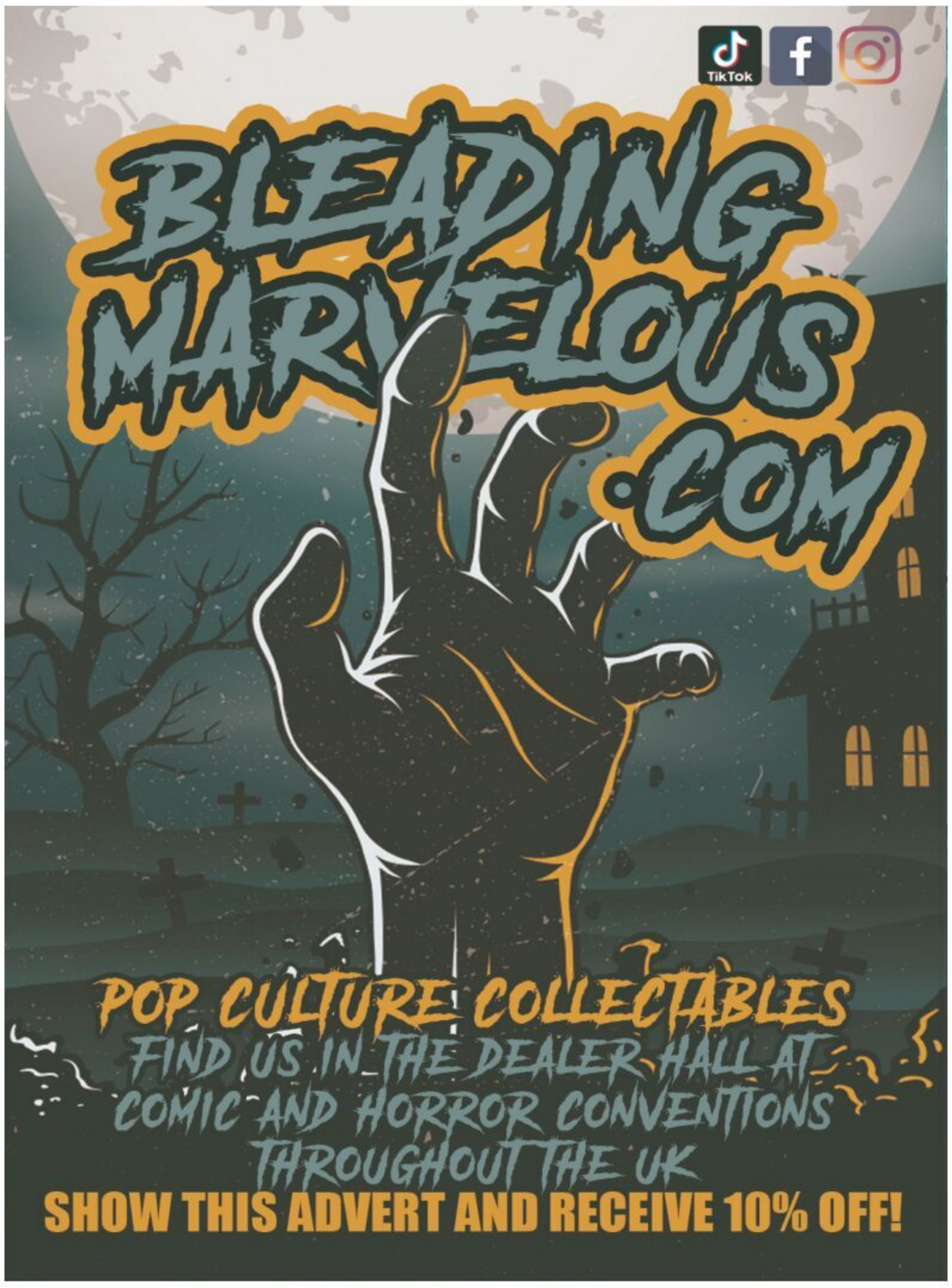
PIGGY	★★★	P35

TV

OUT NOW

HOUSE OF THE DRAGON	★★★	P44
SHE-HULK: ATTORNEY AT LAW	★★★★	P46
BAD SISTERS	★★★★	P48

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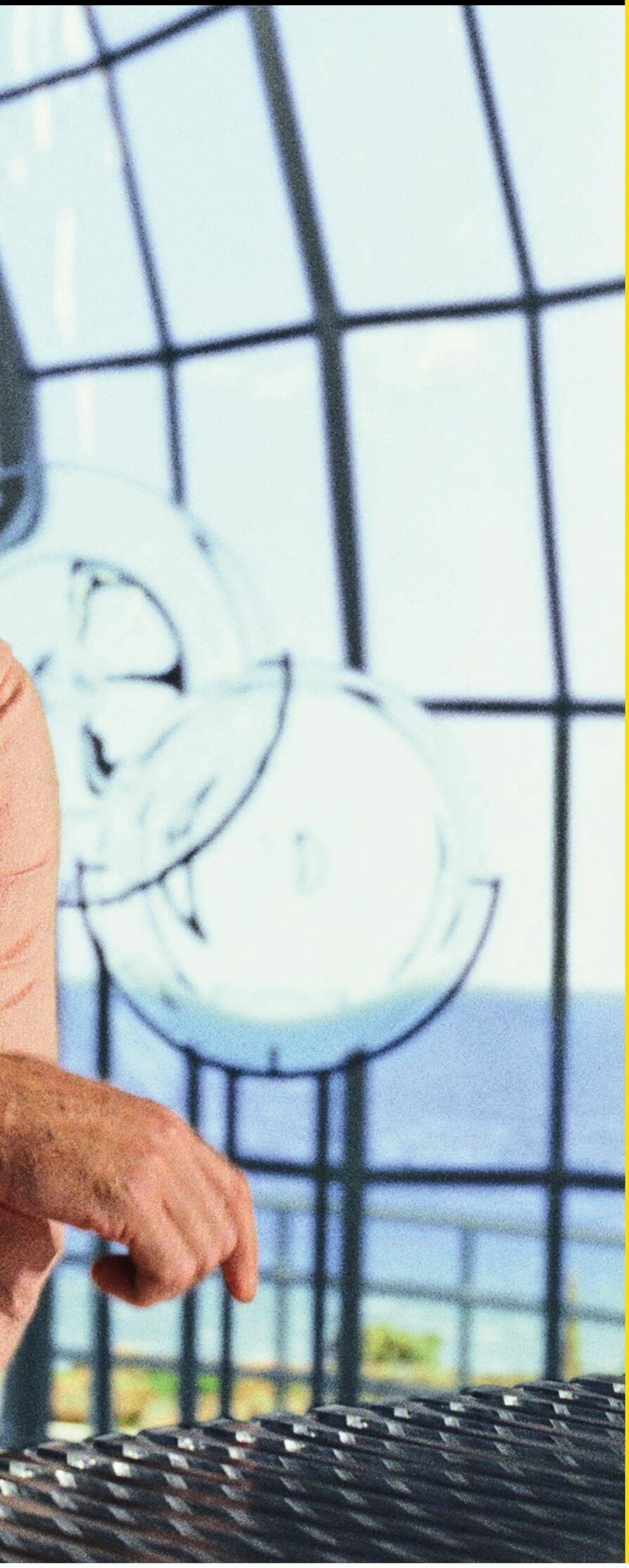
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BACK ON THE CASE

THINK YOU KNOW WHAT TO EXPECT FROM A *KNIVES OUT* SEQUEL? AS DIRECTOR RIAN JOHNSON, DANIEL CRAIG AND THE CAST OF SUN-BAKED MURDER-MYSTERY **GLASS ONION** TELL US, YOU HAVEN'T A CLUE...

WORDS
HANNA FLINT

RIAN JOHNSON WAS UNDAUNTED.



He didn't know if he could pull it off. For the first time, he had challenged himself to write a sequel to one of his own original films and make it just as fresh, unique and exciting, in a much shorter space of time. "It was quite terrifying for a moment there realising, 'Oh, it took ten years to get *Knives Out* [made] — am I gonna be able to do it?'" he says of his follow-up sojourn into the world of murder-mysteries. "If you have a movie that's well received, it becomes this gilded object that feels very outside of yourself and you forget how you made it. The insecurities can be a lot worse."

Johnson is no stranger to mystery-writing, and 2005's *Brick* and 2012's *Looper* showed off his penchant for genre-bending, but 2019's *Knives Out* was a true game-changer, dusting the cobwebs off the traditional whodunnit formula defined by the works of Agatha Christie and Sherlock Holmes novels. Rather than simply adapting those stories, which have been done to intricately plotted death, Johnson invented his own sleuthing world with a thoroughly contemporary landscape. There was thriller pacing, sharp social commentary, even sharper zingers, an A-list ensemble and an eccentric gentleman detective to rival any screen versions of Holmes or Poirot.

Knives Out is the filmmaker's best-received movie on Rotten Tomatoes and earned a pretty penny at the global box office ($311.6 million against a $40 million budget), as well as an Oscar nomination for Best Original Screenplay, and it found an even wider audience after landing on Netflix. No surprise, then, that the streaming service wanted to bag the rights to two sequels, with Daniel Craig returning as famed "Kentucky-fried" investigator Benoit Blanc. So much so that they shelled out a staggering $469 million for the privilege. Yet for Johnson, the question of being able to recreate that magical concoction in as refreshing a way as possible loomed over the writing process.

"How the fuck do we take something that caught people's imagination and made them talk about murder mysteries, and do it again without it becoming a pastiche of itself?" Craig himself asks, before pointing to his own experience over five James Bond films. "I've spent the past 15 years of my life trying to do that in a franchise, so I'm not afraid of it. If you've got the right people in the room and the right talent, then you can do it. Rian's a genius writer and doesn't want to repeat [himself]. Neither do we want to let people down; we want audiences to enjoy the world that we created in the first one and believe in this one."

For Johnson, that wasn't about approaching this new film as a typical sequel. As he tweeted in June, he wanted to "emulate Christie and have every film be like a whole new book, with its own tone, ambition, reason for being." This one, Johnson tells us, is a "very different narrative gambit". Allow us, then, to put our own investigative skills to good use and peel back the many layers of *Glass Onion: A Knives Out Mystery*.

So, about that title. As you can see above, in neon, it is very much related to a glass building, although fans online have also guessed it has something to do with the 1968 Beatles track. Correct, confirms Johnson. "The song is an absolute banger and it's one that has nonsense lyrics with a purpose. John [Lennon] was getting fed up with everyone picking apart all [their songs] so he made one that was uninterpretable. I found that quite fun in relation to the movie and 'Glass Onion' is something that is very ›





Clockwise from left: Miles Bron (Edward Norton) and Benoit Blanc (Daniel Craig) glance at a glass... er, onion?; Peg (Jessica Henwick) and Andi (Janelle Monáe) flank the good detective; Benoit holds court.



central to the film as a metaphor — Benoit Blanc loves his metaphors. It's gonna figure deeply."

Johnson won't confirm if the song will feature on the soundtrack, but he does reveal another influence. The 1973 film *The Last Of Sheila*, co-written by late musical genius Stephen Sondheim and actor Anthony Perkins, was inspired by the murder-mystery parties that Sondheim liked to throw for his friends, and is one of Johnson's faves. *Glass Onion* shares a similar premise. Where *Knives Out* hinges on the suspicious death of a famed mystery writer, this time a group of old friends and new acquaintances are reunited by an invitation from their rich friend to a Greek island for a murder-mystery game.

"The whole movie takes place in the context of that, which adds a layer of meta-ness, in a strange way. But I wouldn't read too much into me saying, 'It's very influenced by *The Last Of Sheila*,'" notes Johnson, who spoke to Sondheim before his death last year and got his seal of approval for using his songs in *Glass Onion* (in *Knives Out*, Benoit Blanc gives a stirring rendition of 'Losing My Mind' from Sondheim's 1971 musical *Follies*). But a song and dance affair this ain't. "I've probably committed the greatest crime to cinema by having both Janelle Monáe and Leslie Odom Jr in the movie and I haven't made it a musical," Johnson chuckles. "I apologise!"

The two actors are among a cast that brings to mind the love-hate tension that had audiences completely invested in the tempestuous dynamic of *Knives Out*'s Thrombey family and household staff. "I imagine that as complicated as these relationships are, these people have history, so what keeps them coming back together?" says Odom Jr, who plays Lionel Toussaint, a scientist feeling the weight of familial legacy on his shoulders. "I thought a lot about the original spark of what brought them together when they were younger. There must be something in it that is joyful. As fraught as we arrive on that island in Greece at the start of this film, that's not where we began. Love is complicated, friendships can be complicated."

Lionel works for Edward Norton's Miles Bron, a disruptive creator with a big vision. "The species that he is derived from will be instantly recognisable to a lot of people in our era of tech billionaires," says Norton. Monáe's Cassandra 'Andi' Brand is a tech entrepreneur, and it was fortuitous that Johnson reached out to the singer. "I have murder-mystery parties at my house," she says. "So this was a dream come true. I felt heard, I felt seen, it was a truly collaborative process with Rian."

Dave Bautista's "bombastic" YouTube star Duke Cody, who is dealing with some recent scandals, is in attendance with his younger girlfriend Whiskey (Madelyn Cline), who works on his channel and is "trying to figure out what her next step is going to be in terms of her own ambition," says Johnson. "Madelyn is a phenomenal young actor who has incredible comic skills. With a movie like this you have a lot of group shots and so what's absolutely gold is if somebody's giving you something subtle in the background. Maddie would always bring that."

As did Kathryn Hahn as Claire Debella, an independent Connecticut governor running for Senate who Johnson says "pisses everyone off, and is trying to thread the needle in many different ways, in terms of her public persona and what she's willing to compromise in order to stay in office." Also in the mix is Kate Hudson, who admits her "ego was tested for about five minutes" when Johnson asked her to read for the part of fabulous fashionista Birdie Jay. She shares an "odd couple" relationship with her assistant Peg, played by Jessica Henwick.

"I never want to be an actor that doesn't show up like an actor," Hudson says of her audition which, obviously, worked out well. Johnson saw hints of her mother Goldie Hawn's comic work coming through, but Hudson shone on her own terms, he says: "She completely squeezed all the juice out of the role, in the best way possible." Her casting meant a *How To Lose A Guy In Ten Days* reunion with Hahn, and brought a whole new comedic element to proceedings. "Rian used to laugh at us because if ever we were together and in shot, we couldn't help but ad lib," says Hudson. "Kathryn and I could go on forever."

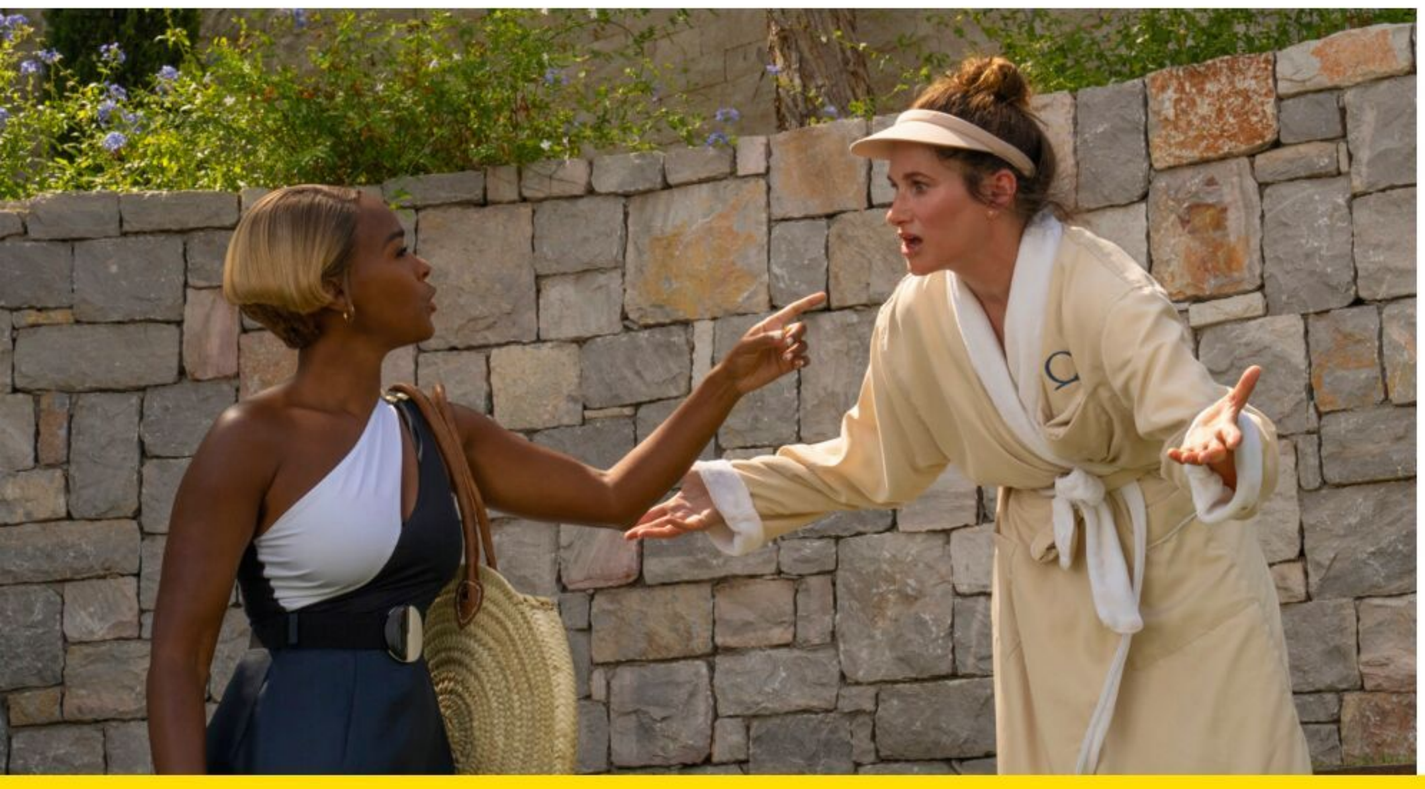
As well as all of these new cast members, Johnson says that while the *Knives Out* mysteries all take place within the same











Clockwise from top left: Craig — rocking Benoit's summer threads — heads behind the camera to check out the day's progress with director Rian Johnson; Miles and Duke (Dave Bautista) stare it out; We're guessing Birdie (Kate Hudson), Lionel (Leslie Odom Jr) and Claire (Kathryn Hahn) aren't looking at a cute kitten vid; A tense Miles; Andi and Claire at odds.

universe, that doesn't mean actors can't return as different characters, as with the Peter Ustinov Poirot films, where Jane Birkin and Maggie Smith played different roles in *Death On The Nile* and *Evil Under The Sun*. "The idea of getting to work with a bunch of new actors every time is exciting for me, but if we can put Jamie Lee Curtis in a moustache as another character, I'll do it in a heartbeat," he says. "Noah Segan played Trooper Wagner [in *Knives Out*] and has been in every movie I've ever done. He's in *Glass Onion* — not as that character."

Of course, there's one actor who *is* reprising his role. And this time, the detective got the chance to dig deeper.

It was "bizarre" writing Benoit Blanc a second time around, says Johnson. Now that he had Daniel Craig's eccentric performance in his head, he had to break free from "writing a caricature" based upon it, and decided to upgrade the Southern sleuth from a supporting role to a more central position. "In [*Knives Out*], in terms of the narrative structure, Benoit Blanc is almost the antagonist," says Johnson. "He's the threat, like the shark in *Jaws*. He circles the periphery and pops up here and there. Now, you're seeing the story much more through his eyes. There's definitely more Blanc, but it's not very interesting to me, the notion of building out Benoit's life. Like with Poirot and Miss Marple, what's fun is how the elements of Benoit's character reveal themselves through his act of solving each one of these mysteries."

Johnson and Craig had conversations during the writing process about retaining the enigma of the sleuth, but the actor left the filmmaker to it. "I trust him to come up with the goods because he always does," says Craig. When those goods arrived in the script, Craig began the process of putting Benoit Blanc back on again. "I went away to work with an accent coach for three or four months before we started shooting," he says. "I'd forgotten the accent and I didn't want to do a pastiche. I wanted to make it as grounded and as anchored in reality as possible."

The circumstances of the detective's arrival in Greece are also critical to the plot, says Craig. "He knows it's a mystery; he's got to figure out how best to treat these people so they'll give up the information that he requires. That's something we played around with. We don't know who he is, therefore is he being genuine with these people or not? He's a nice person. He's not soft, he's tough, but he feels the best way to disarm and get information is to be polite and confined in that way."

Working with costume designer Jenny Eagan, Craig had fun building a summer wardrobe that references the likes of *To Catch A Thief* and *Monsieur Hulot's Holiday*. "He's a character that is interested in the way he looks, and that he looks smart and presentable every day," says Craig. "There's a touch of glamour ›

Above: A light moment for Miles.

but relaxed — lots of linen, 1940s trouser lengths. Hopefully, it works and is still slightly humorous." Just don't expect Craig to be ruining his sharp tailoring with action sequences. "I might pick up the pace occasionally — I didn't do this job to do stunts!" he says. Benoit may not be challenged physically, but a psychological workout is looking likely. And not just for him.

As much as *Knives Out* boasted cutting (and funny) dialogue — and *Glass Onion* will be very much "snark city", as Odom Jr puts it — pathos was never in short supply. "On set, there was a real deep moment around a particular scene that I got emotional and had to *go there* on," Monáe recalls. "All of the crew and cast came up to me to hug and support me. Rian is one of the most beautiful spirits that I've met. He pushed me. When I read the script, I was like, 'Okay, I have to lock in with this and go places that I haven't necessarily gone to.' This film is going to take you on rides of all the emotions — it's gonna give you all the feels."

Norton, who has long wanted to channel his 20-year friendship with Johnson into a creative endeavour, was impressed with the fresh direction: "He went for a different milieu; he's sticking a fork in things that will give people a real smile about the culture that we're in, and about dynamics that we see in the headlines every day."

Knives Out playfully repurposed the "upstairs/downstairs" of the Victorian/Edwardian-era whodunnits without being too soapboxy. With *Glass Onion*, Johnson continues that modern exploration of economic and social status causing friction between its key players. "The movie itself is not entirely about the income divide, but that definitely has a huge place in it," he says. "We're in a moment in history where the divide feels increasingly obscene. Like a circus that we can't keep our eyes off even as the negative effects of it become more and more real in all our lives."

Hahn says that "there's a hubris knockdown in it which is heavenly," adding that the film includes an "eat the rich" element. That, Craig agrees, is particularly apt. "Money is very important to everybody, and too much money can turn people into crazy people very quickly," he says. "Money and power, what that influences, the betrayal of trust... these messages are not on the surface, they're there for people to dig out [in the film]."

If *Knives Out* is an opera, then *Glass Onion* is "an operetta", says Hahn. "The script is so tight, you hear the music of it so well," she adds. "Everybody had a note in that orchestra and it was fun to find those rhythms together as a group to make it sing." Shooting in Greece — *The Lost Daughter* was shot on the same island of Spetses — meant the set was extremely hot, distancing it from the cold, dreary New England locale of its predecessor. As well as *The Last Of Sheila*, Johnson owed much to the 1982 film *Evil Under The Sun*, which shifted events in Christie's book from the Devon seaside to an exclusive island in the Adriatic Sea. "I wrote it when we were all locked down in that first Covid wave, which probably explains why I have the characters jetting off to Greece — it's very much the glamorous European-vacation mystery," says the director. "There's an element of fantasy to it but the movie is set in 2020. It's not a Covid



Here, top to bottom: Hijinx for Duke (Dave Bautista) and Whiskey (Madelyn Cline); Andi lurks in the shadows; Five suspects in the frame; Johnson does a Blanc check.









movie; not everyone's walking around in masks for the whole thing, but it's something that is discreetly handled."

This vibrant location provided Johnson with a "smorgasbord of visual sumptuousness" to stand apart from *Knives Out* and gave him fresh narrative texture. "Like the sunshine-baked menace of *Chinatown* or the crop-duster scene in *North By Northwest*, I was thinking about bright open sunshine as a menacing environment," he says, adding that the score, written by his cousin and frequent collaborator Nathan Johnson, reinforces the bold aesthetic contrast from the original. "[*Knives Out*] was very strings-based, sharp and very chamber orchestra, but the big reference we looked at [here] was Nino Rota's main theme for *Death On The Nile*," says the director. "Big, lush, romantic and boisterous with a thread of madness going through it."

Johnson returned to Belgrade, Serbia (where he shot *The Brothers Bloom*), to film interior scenes on soundstages. Covid precautions prevented the cast from socialising outside the hotel they shared, but, in an even more meta twist, the troupe's creative camaraderie was solidified during various excursions to play murder-mystery games. "We had a roof bar where we made our escape, and there were some pretty epic Saturday-night games of Mafia," says Norton. "Janelle would come fully-dressed in character. It was a bunch of fine actors and so, with the posturing and feints, there were some great reveals."

Hudson recalls that "it would turn into a dance party. Rian's moves changed the energy of the party. When Rian gets going, everybody starts partying harder." It's that exuberant energy that sets the playful, heightened tone for these *Knives Out* mysteries, but it's the rules that Johnson puts in place that ensure we're taken on a newfangled ride, rather than taken for one.

"We are fair to the reader only if he is a genius," Manfred Lee, co-writer of the famous Ellery Queen amateur-detective novels, once said of his writing formula. It's a quote Johnson came across recently, and already abides by. "We play fair in terms of, yes, everything you need to see, we're showing you," he states. "Whodunnit movies are sometimes wrongly perceived as being puzzles. To me, the trick is the movie works as a movie; it has to work as a narrative ride. Part of that satisfaction is feeling like you can look back and all these things were set up and clicked."

Johnson's second *Knives Out* mystery aims to deliver a slew of surprising, shocking and sensational flavours to once again sate our appetite for murder mysteries — just not quite in the same way. "Rian does an incredible job in the execution of taking it outside of where the first one was and making the audience feel like they're in a completely different world," says Hudson. "We don't have a lot of murder-mystery films out that innovate in this space," adds Monáe. "So that within itself makes it its own unique, fun, weird thing."

All eyes are on this new tangled web to deliver the greatness of its forerunner while standing on its own two feet. The game is certainly afoot. And while the anticipation is keen, Johnson is confident he's met lofty expectations. "One thing I can promise is you won't be bored — all the knives are still out." Just don't cut yourself on the glass.

***GLASS ONION: A KNIVES OUT MYSTERY* IS ON NETFLIX FROM 23 DECEMBER**

KNOW YOUR ONIONS

BEFORE *GLASS ONION* THERE WAS… THIS LOT. READ IT AND WEEP



CRY, ONION! (1975)

This Spaghetti Western from Enzo G. Castellari sees farmer Onion Jack (Franco Nero) battle an oil company for the rights to his beloved onion field. A curly-permed Nero not only eats and breathes onions, he uses them to pelt and suffocate his victims to death. Sadly, Jack doesn't say, "That's shallot" after each kill.



THE ONION FIELD (1979)

Highly regarded in its day, Harold Becker's complex, detailed adaptation of Joseph Wambaugh's novel tackles the survivor's guilt of a cop (John Savage) following the murder of his partner (Ted Danson) by two hijackers (Franklyn Seales, an excellent James Woods), in Bakersfield's onion fields. The greatest film with onion in the title to date. Your move, Rian.



TRIADS, YARDIES AND ONION BHAJEES! (2003)

A post *Lock, Stock* Brit crime flick, this centres on a London turf war between Asian crime syndicate the Holy Smokes, the Chinese Triads, the English Firm and the Jamaican Yardies. Tries to do for Southall what *The Sopranos* does for New Jersey. Doesn't succeed.



THE ONION MOVIE (2008)

A DTV self-referential, scattershot, mostly misfiring series of vignettes from the US satirical website. Includes cameos from — together at last! — Kevin Federline, Rodney Dangerfield and Steven Seagal, who sends himself up as an action hero called 'Cock Puncher.' 'Nuff said.

IAN FREER



FULL FORCE

RIAN JOHNSON THREW EVERYTHING HE HAD INTO **THE LAST JEDI**, WHICH CHALLENGED EVERYONE: HIM, HIS CAST AND HIS AUDIENCE. FIVE YEARS SINCE ITS RELEASE, HE LOOKS BACK AT THE FILM THAT SHOOK UP THE *STAR WARS* UNIVERSE FOREVER

WORDS
ALEX GODFREY



THE DUST HAS SETTLED.

Or has it? It's been five years since *The Last Jedi* was released. The sequel trilogy wrapped up in 2019. Lucasfilm and Disney+ are wheeling out *Star Wars* shows like they're trying to complete the Kessel Run in less than 12 parsecs. Rian Johnson has moved on, and is in the midst of an already hugely successful murder-mystery franchise. And yet... and yet.

We wanted to revisit *The Last Jedi* because a) we love it so, and b) it's hard to think of another recent *Star Wars* outing that has inspired quite so much discussion. And there was *so much* discussion. "Still is!" laughs Rian Johnson. Yes. There very much is.

The Last Jedi fires people up. Passions still run high for the film that took what J.J. Abrams had introduced with *The Force Awakens* and deepened it, interrogated it, flipped it, taking the saga in unpredictable and thrilling directions. Johnson made daring choices, sometimes shocking us — and his own cast — while remaining true to the foundations laid by George Lucas. "I'm even more proud of it five years on," Johnson says now, on Zoom video from his home in Los Angeles. "When I was up at bat, I really swung at the ball."

That he did. There's all the fun stuff: that incredible Kylo-and-Rey fight in Snoke's throne room; that breathtaking Holdo manoeuvre; that gobsmacking climactic showdown; and, erm, Luke milking that massive island creature and quaffing the spoils. But most of all, it has *heart*, acutely challenging its characters while giving us everything we wanted, without us knowing we wanted it. Which was exactly the point. Its left-turns felt right.

"I love it as a *Star Wars* movie," says Johnson, who can now appreciate it with *somewhat* of a detached eye. "My intention from the start was to put everything I love about *Star Wars* into it. And, in a very meaningful way, try and dig into what *Star Wars* means to me, what *Star Wars* meant when I was a kid, what *Star Wars* meant now, through the whole journey I had, that I think a lot of us our age had," he says, referring to a childhood with the original trilogy before then, as an adult, taking in the prequels, and finally ruminating on — and running with — it all as he geared up for his own contribution. For one film at least, the fate of the galaxy was in his hands.

At first, he was scared. Kathleen Kennedy — guardian of the galaxy (or, if you want to go with the official title, President of Lucasfilm) — was a fan of Johnson's work, and offered him the job in 2014. As a lifelong fan, he jumped on it. But not without trepidation. "You would think that *Star Wars* meaning this much to you would make you very terrified of the prospect of the gravity of it, and it did," he remembers. "But the thing



















Left: Snowtroopers advance. **Here, top to bottom:** An older, subdued Luke (Mark Hamill) hands over the baton — well, lightsaber — to Rey (Daisy Ridley); Snoke (Andy Serkis) gets heavy with Rey; There goes Kylo Ren's mask; Finn (John Boyega) and Rose Tico (Kelly Marie Tran); Kylo Ren (Adam Driver) fired up.

that makes you nervous about the gravity of approaching it is the thing that gives you the confidence of, 'I know what this is to me, I know what my connection is to it, I know what I'm doing with it.' I don't think I could have done this if I didn't have those deeply rooted feelings."

Johnson's previous films (*Brick*, *The Brothers Bloom*, *Looper*) all play with storytelling, prodding at it, picking it apart. Writing *The Last Jedi*, he followed suit, deconstructing myths, stripping off layers. Snoke (Andy Serkis), who, in *The Force Awakens*, had been presented as the sequel trilogy's big bad, would soon be definitively dispatched. Kylo Ren (Adam Driver) destroys his own mask. Rey (Daisy Ridley) discovers (or remembers) that her parents are nobodies — a bold curveball in itself. Luke (Mark Hamill) turns his back on his own legend, believing himself to be part of the problem. Even Yoda (Frank Oz) sets fire to the sacred Jedi texts, giggling as they burn.

Picking up the gauntlet from *The Force Awakens* (which had just started shooting as Johnson started writing), Johnson went to the most interesting places he could. "I think it's impossible for any of us to approach *Star Wars* without thinking about it as a myth that we were raised with, and how that myth, that story, baked itself into us and affected us," he says. "The ultimate intent was not to strip away — the intent was to get to the basic, fundamental power of myth. And ultimately I hope the film is an affirmation of the power of the myth of *Star Wars* in our lives."

The Last Jedi ends with Luke dying, having Force-projected a kickass facsimile of himself to take on an oblivious, soon to be furious Kylo Ren, in order to buy the escaping Resistance some time. Talk of that showstopping showdown, though, spreads across the galaxy, inspiring a new generation in awe of what the returning hero has done. They even play with a (homemade) Luke Skywalker action figure — just like Rian Johnson did as a kid.

The big theme of the film — both Luke and Kylo insist to Rey that the past must die — has been a red herring. "The final images of the movie, to me, are not deconstructing the myth of Luke Skywalker, they're building it, and they're him embracing it," says Johnson. "They're him absolutely defying the notion of, 'Throw away the past,' and embracing what actually matters about his myth and what's going to inspire the next generation. So for me, the process of stripping away is always in the interest of getting to something essential that really matters." Getting to that place, though, wasn't going to be smooth.

Top to bottom: A final kiss for the briefly reunited Skywalker siblings; Leia (Carrie Fisher), floating through space; Rian Johnson (right foreground) directing Daisy Ridley.

Johnson didn't want to give fans what they *thought* they wanted, but to "form a deeper engagement with the audience by playing chess with their expectations." In that way, he says, he was honouring what Lucas did with *The Empire Strikes Back*, paying tribute to "the deeply unsettling resonance of what it did story-wise. Not just the big twist, but everything, down to the heroes being split up, and deeply tested, and losing but persevering... All of it was the opposite of what any of us expected. And in a way that I think sent a fishhook deep in my brain."

That's one of the reasons why Johnson revealed Rey's parents, in perhaps the film's ›











Here, top to bottom: An army of gorilla walkers, only one Luke Skywalker; An uncomfortable moment for Rey; Johnson directing Fisher — who became a good friend — on set; BB-8 — *not* a slot machine, thank you very much — with gambling alien Dobbu Scay, voiced by Mark Hamill. **Right:** Luke back on the Falcon.

most meta moment, to be nobody in particular. "You have no place in this story," Kylo Ren tells her. It was a hell of a lot more interesting than revealing that she was Ben Kenobi's lovechild (or, well, whatever she might have ended up being in another film, but let's not speak of that again). It's a bold bit of anti-fan service, *Empire* suggests to Johnson — but he disagrees.

"To me, actual fan-service is serving the characters in the most deeply affecting way possible," he explains. "I know, as a fan, there is a pleasure in just being able to point at the screen and say, 'Oh, I recognise that, it feels good to see that.' But to me, the deeper and more interesting, and ultimately more meaningful pleasure, is to have story choices that serve the characters in ways that maybe you didn't expect, but that ultimately make things harder on them, and thus make their eventual victory more satisfying."

Which brings us to Luke. Famously, Mark Hamill was not happy with Johnson's choices for the Jedi, last seen reconciling with his dad and defeating the Empire, but now grizzled and grumpy, guzzling that creature's milk, shutting himself off from the Force and refusing to help his friends and family. He eventually saves the day... but then dies. Hamill spoke out about it in the press before he — or any of us — had seen the film. But Johnson saw no value, as he tweeted to a disgruntled *Star Wars* fan in 2019, in treating Luke "as a video-game character who has achieved a binary, permanent power-up".

In pre-production, Hamill had it out with Johnson, telling him, unfiltered, that he disagreed with his choices. Johnson, having already questioned those choices over and over again as he wrote the screenplay, was confident with where he had ended up. But still. When Luke Skywalker himself says, "Erm, I'm not sure about this," Johnson, surely, lying in bed that night, with the weight of those choices on his shoulders, must have had a time of it.

"I mean..." Johnson pauses. "It was also ultimately..." Another pause. "To the point where I..." Another pause. He's reliving it, and it's tough. "I'm choosing my words carefully, not to be diplomatic, but I don't want to frame Mark's experience of this through my lens because there's no possible way I can ever put myself in the shoes of Mark, or Carrie [Fisher], having lived their entire lives being known as these characters. And what it's like to play them first in their twenties, and then to come back and play them in these movies and have a script handed to you saying, 'Well, it's *this* now'... I can never fathom what that experience is like. It's impossible."

Yes, he says, it was hard. "If Mark Hamill is talking to me about Luke Skywalker, I'm gonna listen to him, and I gotta think about that and argue with him and go back and forth. And genuinely plumb the depths of my soul and what I wrote and figure out if this seems right. Also, though, remembering that, obviously, he created the character on screen, but he's Mark Hamill, he's not literally Luke Skywalker. Luke Skywalker lives as a creation on that screen. He's a myth. And as such, he only really lives in the minds of people who listen to and in various ways believe that myth. And I know that was me. So, it's complicated. But I mean, the short answer to your question is, it was fucking terrifying," he laughs.

He got through it, though, remaining confident that he was doing the right thing for Luke, for the film, for *Star Wars*. It's that *actual* fan-service again. And, as Johnson stresses, "For all the back and forth, on day one of shooting, Mark said, 'Okay, this is the vision that you're going for, and I'm going to do the best version of that I possibly can.'" And he's duly great in the film, selling every single moment of what Johnson had written. Hamill later said he shouldn't have aired his grievances to the press and had revised his opinion, calling *The Last Jedi* "a stunning film". Just like that older, crochety Luke, he changed his mind.

Alamy, Disney, Landmark













Here, top to bottom: Old pals Yoda (Frank Oz) and Luke in reflective mood; The breathtaking Holdo manoeuvre; Jedi Caretakers from the Lanai species; Hoping for answers on Ahch-To, Rey sees only herself; Finn versus Captain Phasma (Gwendoline Christie).

It was an emotional time across the board. Johnson speaks in hushed tones about reuniting Hamill and Fisher on set — their incredibly touching screen reunion was just as poignant in reality. "Everybody on that massive crew showed up" that day, he remembers. "It was like people were arriving to church. There was a silence, and a reverence." And Johnson becomes sombre himself as he recalls learning of Fisher's passing. They were close.

"We were in post-production when we got the news, and, um..." He breaks off. There isn't suitable vocabulary. "She had really become a friend, a really important person in my life," he says, abandoning eye contact for a bit, looking down. "She meant a lot to a lot of people. I'm not gonna be able to have good words, I apologise. Carrie meant so much to me." He speaks wistfully of what might have been, of how he'd set the final film up for her to take the lead. "It always felt natural that it was father, mentor, mother. Those were the three films."

Yet, regardless of what came next, *The Last Jedi* feels like a complete piece of work, ending on a hopeful note, its sentiment so perfectly pitched, its characters having gone through the mill and changed as a result. It was a huge success, making over $1.3 billion and generating mostly gushing reviews.

Yes, it has its detractors. Some very vocal. *Very* vocal. Johnson was already active on Twitter, and from the outside seems to have a thick skin, but dealing with vicious vitriol wasn't fun. "It's been a process. At the beginning, it was not easy. It was incredibly painful. It felt horrible. Before the movie came out, if one person said something slightly snarky to me on Twitter, I felt a deep, 'Oh my God, there's someone out there that doesn't like me... I have to fix this,'" he laughs. "And I'm cured of that!" he continues, now laughing uproariously. Because there has been a *barrage* of aggressively aggrieved *Star Wars* tweeters attempting to rip him apart.

He's not definitively sure about the pros and cons of having got used to it. "In the context of social media, and maybe in the context just of being a human being in the world, it's a very healthy thing to have been put through the fire on," he says. "You could also make the argument that those nerve-endings that have been seared off is a bad thing. I don't know." He still loves Twitter, though, he says, loves hearing from fans, talking to them. And he is all for criticism. Besides, the vocal minority are very much a minority.

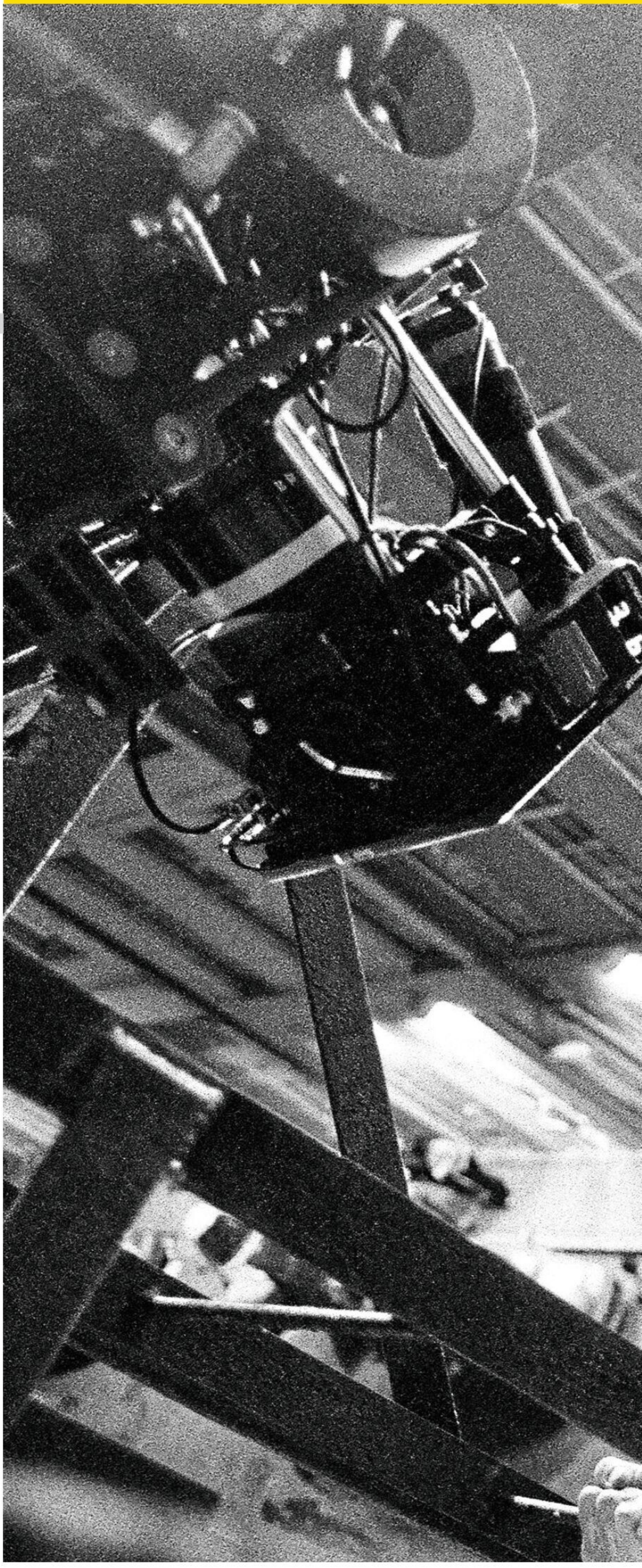
"The element that I talk about when I talk about a small fraction that gets amplified is not the section of *Star Wars* fans that didn't like the movie; it's the section of them that are abusive online, and that are actively hostile and toxic. And it's very important to make that distinction, because I don't want anyone thinking that I'm marginalising anyone who doesn't like the movie, and saying it's just a small percentage. Having grown up a *Star Wars* fan, part of the pleasure of it is everybody liking different stuff and talking about it and arguing and fighting about it."

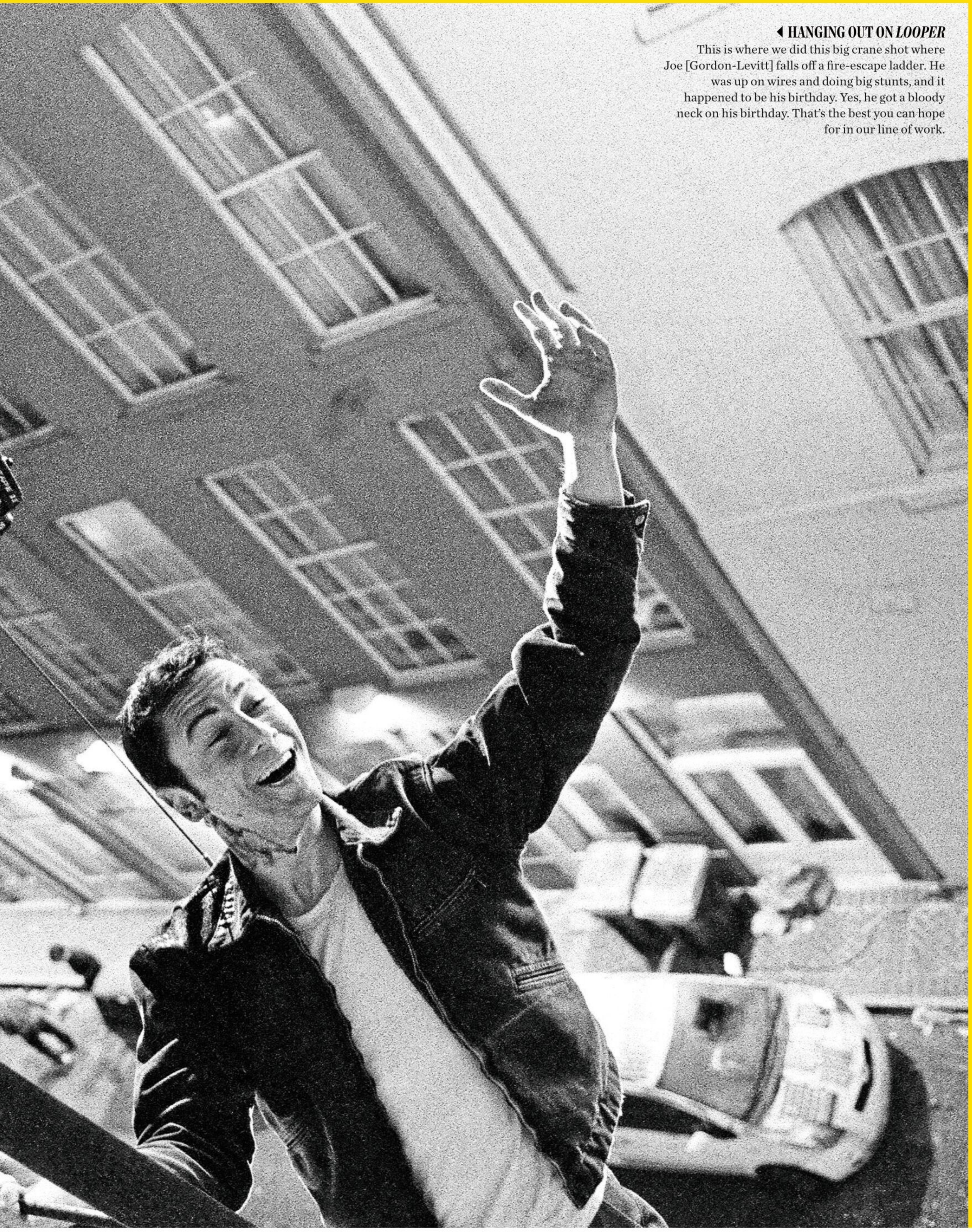
That's what he is — a *Star Wars* fan who made a *Star Wars* movie about *Star Wars*, the most *Star Wars* movie that he could, in thrall to it all. And if anything, he seems to love *Star Wars* even more than ever. His mooted new trilogy, announced a month before *The Last Jedi* was released in 2017, is on hold, due to Johnson's residency in the *Knives Out* universe, but he's itching to return. "I've stayed close to Kathy [Kennedy] and we get together often and talk about it. It's just at this point a matter of schedule and when it can happen. It would break my heart if I were finished, if I couldn't get back in that sandbox at some point." His eyes light up. He grins at the thought of making more *Star Wars* films. This was never just a job. Whether he returns or not, he's in this for life. E

RIGHT FROM THE START, RIAN JOHNSON HAS BEEN TAKING PHOTOS ON HIS SETS, CAPTURING CANDID MOMENTS FOR POSTERITY. HERE, HE LEADS US THROUGH A NOSTALGIC TOUR OF HIS WORK, INCLUDING SOME IMAGES NEVER SEEN BEFORE

CALLING THE SHOTS

CAPTIONS
RIAN JOHNSON





◀ HANGING OUT ON *LOOPER*

This is where we did this big crane shot where Joe [Gordon-Levitt] falls off a fire-escape ladder. He was up on wires and doing big stunts, and it happened to be his birthday. Yes, he got a bloody neck on his birthday. That's the best you can hope for in our line of work.



BRICK (2005)

LOCKER ROOM WITH A VIEW ▲

While on *Brick*, I was using my 2003-era Nokia cell phone to take photos. They're pretty cool, though: they almost have an abstract quality because they're so low-res.



TUNNEL VISION ▶

Five or six years before *Brick*, I was trying and failing to get it made, and got really frustrated. So I took my little brother Chris down to my high school and we spent a day taking black-and-white photos, blocking out scenes from the movie. So this is Chris and his friends. Just a test shot that I did of them, on 35mm.



SMOKE SCREEN ▶

There's a big scene that takes place in this drainage tunnel. This was the day there. So this is Noah Segan, Joe [Gordon-Levitt], Noah Fleiss and Lukas Haas.



READY FOR MY CLOSE-UP, MR JOHNSON ▶

Joe was beat up for a lot of *Brick*. And we also had an incredibly tight shooting schedule. Our make-up department did the Lord's work in keeping him looking terrible.



LOOPER (2012)

JGL, MVP ▲

On this TV series I'm doing now called *Poker Face*, I just worked with Joe again. We'd stayed close friends over the years but it was the first time we've worked together since *Looper*, and looking back at these photos, God, man, I had really missed working with him. It's special to have a collaborator like that.

BLUNT INSTRUMENT ▶

Emily [Blunt] brought a soulfulness, and so much incredible depth, to the part. I love this photo because if you see the shot in the movie, it's literally just a close-up of her hand against [Gordon-Levitt's] hair, brushing it. And then you see the context here, you see her face and the emotion that she's putting into that one moment, with all the artifice of the craft around it.







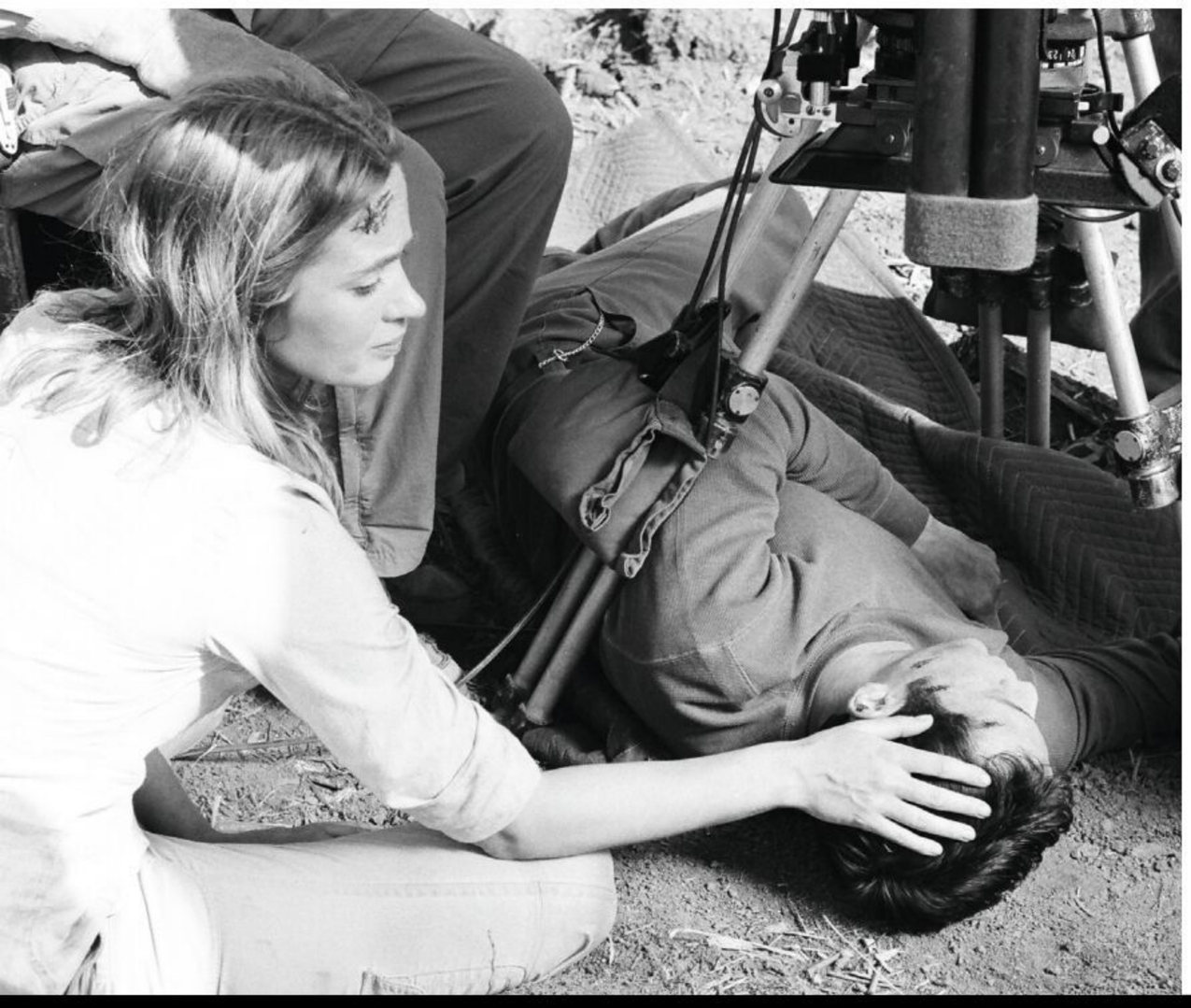
NOT YOUR AVERAGE JOES

We had an amazing artist, Kazuhiro Tsuji, who then did Gary Oldman as Churchill [in Joe Wright's *Darkest Hour*]. We were lucky enough to get him to do the prosthetics here. These are the life-casts of the two Joes. And *Looper* is where I bought a used Leica M6 35mm camera. I've had that on my shoulder for every single shoot since then.



BRUCE ALMIGHTY

We spent two days filming that one conversation at the diner. A great couple of days. I had such a wonderful experience with Bruce [Willis]. He was kind and generous, and he worked his ass off — he really showed up. I had the time of my life with him. I'm really, really grateful I got to work with him on it.





KEEPING IT REAL

I was very happy that we did this, as opposed to shooting the bike against green. I was insistent that we build this rig, and actually drive it down the streets so you get the interaction of everything with it.

BREAKING BAD: 'OZYMANDIAS'

(2013)

STATE OF UNDRESS ▲

As you can see, Bryan [Cranston] was in his underwear for part of the shoot. When I asked him if it was okay to send these photos to you guys, he said, "I've come to accept that what the world really wants to see is more of me in my underwear." The joke on set was, anytime there was a chance to have his pants off, Bryan would zip 'em off in a flash.

SUPER(PINK)MAN ▶

These photos are all from when we were shooting 'Ozymandias', which was the third-to-last episode. This one was when we were out in the desert in New Mexico outside of Albuquerque. It was a pretty amazing couple of days. This is Aaron [Paul] just messing around. He's doing the Superman pose.



MAKING MEMORIES ▼

The very last day, it was recreating moments from very early in the series, when life was simpler and they were just cooking meth in the desert. Like normal people.





CHEMISTRY TEST ▲

Bryan's in his wig, his look from earlier in the series. This was the very last day of shooting on *Breaking Bad*. I [directed it] after they shot the finale. So I got to be there when Vince [Gilligan] had the big series wrap party. It was very cool.





THE JOKE'S ON SNOKE

Just two guys hanging out! Sharing old times. I think Andy [Serkis] is actually wishing him a fond farewell. This was a beautiful maquette that our creature department built for reference on set, because in the movie Snoke is entirely CG. But we had this maquette there, so it was a very nice photo-op to have Andy with his character.



STAR WARS: THE LAST JEDI

(2017)

THE RED ROOM

Daisy [Ridley] did most of her own wirework, she was up on a lot of wires for a lot of days. But also, you can see how much the set was just the set — it wasn't just a big field of green. And the motion-capture folks at Andy Serkis' company were able to build the mo-cap rig, so Andy could actually be in the throne with the actors and we could still be capturing the data for his performance.

PHASMAGORICAL

Giving Finn this moment to be a badass and face down his old, oppressive boss, Phasma... John [Boyega] just relished it. And he put so much work into the training and the fighting. He just went at it.









GROUNDED FALCON

At some point it started raining, and the entire crew huddled underneath the Falcon for shelter. We were all just under there hanging out underneath the Millennium Falcon to get out of the rain, for about half an hour. It felt like the coolest camping trip of all time.

A PORG IN THE HAND

This is Brian Herring, who also performed BB-8 in the movie. I love photos like this, where you can see the actual work that goes into bringing things to life, from talented craftspeople like Brian.

BROS WANTS TO MAKE US LAUGH, MAKE US CRY, AND BREAK A WHOLE LOT OF NEW GROUND IN THE PROCESS. AS ITS STAR BILLY EICHNER AND THE TEAM TELL US, THE GAY ROMCOM HAS BEEN A LONG TIME COMING



NEW ROMA

WORDS
OLLY RICHARDS

NTICS



LIKE MANY KIDS,

little Billy Eichner was *obsessed* with movies. Growing up in New York in the 1980s, his parents would take him to the cinema often, sometimes at night, so he'd feel like a grown-up. It started with *Bambi*, but as Billy got a little older it was romantic comedies that awakened something in him. "I would see *Sleepless In Seattle* with my parents. Or *When Harry Met Sally*. Or *Parenthood*," says Eichner. "Seeing all these funny guys — Tom Hanks, Steve Martin, Billy Crystal — starring in these big Hollywood comedies, I thought, 'Oh, I could do that.'" It wasn't until he got much older that Eichner was told, "No, sorry, you will not be doing that." Because that's not what gay actors do.

Eichner has had, by any measure, a successful career. First, there was his bizarre comedy gameshow *Billy On The Street*, which saw him running around Manhattan, often with movie stars, shouting at startled members of the public. He's had roles in sitcoms, including *Parks And Recreation*, and Ryan Murphy shows. A lot of comedians with his profile would be courted by movie studios. That didn't happen for Eichner. The biggest role of his movie career thus far is voicing Timon in Jon Favreau's *The Lion King* remake. The best Hollywood saw for him was a meerkat bickering with a farting pig. This might be surprising to many when so much of the cultural world now readily embraces all shades of sexuality and gender identity. But this is Hollywood, ever reluctant to put money behind new-fangled things like gays and women. Hollywood just prefers things as they've always been, no offence.

"As I started to make the rounds in Hollywood, the message I was getting was that the biggest thing I could aspire to be was maybe the wacky neighbour on a bad sitcom," says Eichner. "I only encountered homophobia for the first time in my life as an adult in Hollywood. All those dreams I had as a kid, when I didn't know any better, they now felt impossible."

This year, though, Eichner's finally getting that romcom lead role, at 43. And it's not an indie or streaming release. He's headlining *Bros*, a big, hilarious, mainstream romantic comedy. It's the first time a studio, in this case Universal, has made a theatrically released romcom that stars openly gay people. It's one of those movies Eichner loved as a kid, but starring people like him.

IT'S TELLING OF

Eichner's Hollywood experience that *Bros* didn't originate with him. Having been told he could barely hope for supporting roles, it never occurred to him to suggest he be the main event. It was only when a successful straight man pitched it that Hollywood opened its ears.

"I just thought this guy was a total movie star," says co-writer and director Nicholas Stoller. Stoller had worked with Eichner before, on *Neighbors 2: Sorority Rising* and the short-lived series *Friends From College*. Having made several successful romcoms — *Forgetting Sarah Marshall*, *The Five-Year Engagement* — Stoller wanted to make one centred on a gay couple. Being, as Eichner puts it, "extremely heterosexual", Stoller wanted someone gay to co-write and play the lead. "We'd screened the pilot of *Friends From College* at a movie theatre and every time Billy was on screen, the audience went crazy," says Stoller. "I knew he had a point of view on the world, so I just asked him [in 2017], 'Would you be interested in writing a romantic comedy with you and another actor?' He was into it."

Eichner was thrilled, but terrified. He'd





Left: Bobby (Billy Eichner, second left) takes the floor before Angela (Ts Madison), Wanda (Miss Lawrence), Tamara (Eve Lindley), Robert (Jim Rash) and Cherry (Dot-Marie Jones). **Below:** Luke Macfarlane (centre) as Aaron.

written plenty of scripts, but never a film. He'd certainly never written anything that required him to lay himself out so vulnerably. *Bros* is not autobiographical, but it's very much inspired by Eichner's experience. He plays Bobby, a confident, sarcastic author, podcaster and prominent advocate of LGBTQ+ rights. Like Eichner, Bobby has been single most of his life and happily so. Eichner wanted to tell a story of what happens when that person falls in love for the first time. "I kept saying to Nick, 'I want to make a story about adults.' It's different for a 40-year-old man to fall in love for the first time than for a 20-year-old, or a kid who just came out in high school. We're getting a lot of queer content that happens to be about young people and that's amazing — I don't want to diminish how important those are. But they don't reflect my life."

Eichner's comedy often relies on him seeming furious. To tell *Bros* authentically, he'd have to show softness too. "Nick kept telling me the writing process on a movie like this can be like therapy," says Eichner. "You have to be willing to go there. My priority was that this was funny... but I also knew this was an opportunity to show a different side of myself." That process took years. To help get Eichner there, Stoller called in a man who has a significant track record in minting new comedy stars.



"I'M ALWAYS INTERESTED

in finding people that I think are interesting and talented and have something they're passionate about," says *Bros* producer Judd Apatow. A regular collaborator with Stoller (*Get Him To The Greek*, *Forgetting Sarah Marshall* and more), Apatow is also well-practised in turning burgeoning comedy talent into movie stars. He's shaped the careers of, among others, Seth Rogen, Amy Schumer and Lena Dunham. He's also experienced in producing films about "underserved communities" and disproving the theory that people won't watch them. "When we made *The Big Sick*, it was hard to get people to make it because it was about a Muslim immigrant," he says. "A lot of times the business is about choosing the path of least resistance and chasing things that have already succeeded. It takes some work to change what people think." He was immediately sold on Stoller's pitch. He'd even tried to make his own gay romantic comedy in the past but "couldn't crack the script".

To get this script to a place that was both hilarious and touching, Eichner would have to go through the Apatow scripting 'bootcamp', essentially several years of digging into his own feelings and romantic hang-ups. "I think these things work best when the person who's going to play it is also writing it and is trying to go deep," says Apatow. "I often say these scripts are trying to figure out what your problem is and what would have to happen for you to get over it."

If writing was an education for Eichner, it was also a learning experience for Apatow and Stoller. They know how to make straight romantic comedies, but it was vitally important to Eichner that *Bros* didn't just follow the typical romcom formula. "We've been told 'love is love is love'... and that is, on a very basic, primitive level, true," says Eichner. "But we have our own rules and our own types of relationship, and we always have."

Eichner says it took some educating to help Stoller and Apatow understand the different layers of gay dating. He explained that some gay couples want marriage and kids, some want open relationships, some have no interest in traditional relationships — all of which are true of heterosexuals too, but perhaps less openly discussed. He had to detail, to "a man [Stoller] who married his high-school sweetheart", the dating/hook-up app Grindr, where sex-positivity and shame rub up against each other, and even explain that a happy ending for his romcom wouldn't necessarily be a happy-ever-after.

"It was really just me asking 10,000 questions," says Stoller. "There wasn't anything that was shocking, just eye-opening. I just tried to be very focused on Billy and his worldview." ›



THE HARDEST THING

for Stoller to understand was Eichner's love interest. Aaron is a 40-year-old lawyer, incredibly handsome and gym-buff. Bobby meets him in a club, shirtless, and initially dismisses him as vapid. In most films, he'd be a supplementary douchebag. "When we were writing, I didn't get it," says Stoller. "He seemed like a cypher. Billy said, 'This guy is really insecure, so he puts his stuff into his body image and puts all his ego into being masculine.' I didn't get it." Then Luke Macfarlane auditioned. "I got it. He instantly brought it to life."

When he read Aaron, Macfarlane knew exactly who he was. "He's a gay man of a certain generation, like myself," says Macfarlane, 42. "So much of our identity was built on masculinity. We grew up in the era of Abercrombie & Fitch and Mark Wahlberg in Calvin Klein. We all thought we were supposed to look like Mark Wahlberg on some level."

Macfarlane's experience as a gay man in Hollywood has been different from Eichner's. At the start of his career, he was closeted. He came out in 2008, when he was in the hit show *Brothers And Sisters*, and since then, he's frequently been cast as a straight romantic lead, mostly in Hallmark Channel movies. He's worked regularly, which is not to say homophobia has not touched his career. "I was told it was not a good idea to come out," he says. "So yes, I have been a leading man — I've been a straight leading man — but in TV movies for Hallmark, which is not what this Juilliard grad actor wanted to end up doing [he graduated in the same class as Jessica Chastain]. Not that I'm not grateful for that."

Macfarlane is a revelation in the film, comedically excellent but also emotionally resonant. It's the kind of performance you watch and wonder where he's been, but then the answer is obvious. "It's really hard for me to talk about, because I'll never know what opportunities were taken off the table because I came out," says Macfarlane, but he knew this was a part he had never seen before.

It was important to Eichner that he give as many opportunities as possible to LGBTQ+ people. Before shooting started, it was decided that every role on screen, aside from a sprinkling of cameos, would be played by LGBTQ+ people. "Visibility is key," says Eichner. "Judd has had so much success finding unknown actors and putting together great ensembles. Let's do a *Bridesmaids* but with LGBTQ people."

As one of the few straight people on set, Stoller describes it as "really moving" to see what it meant to all the performers. There's a legitimate question of whether a straight man should have been the one directing them, but Eichner is fully behind his director: "The film was Nick's idea. He brought it to me. And there aren't a ton of openly gay directors who've made as many studio comedies as Nick and Judd. This is a new process for me; I needed someone with a lot of experience."

Stoller and Apatow also had an unplanned role to play, essentially being the eyes of the straight audience for the film. It was not, however, their job to tell Eichner to help straight people understand nuances of the gay community, but to tell him not to. "He would worry about it," says Stoller. "But the more specific you are when you tell someone's story, the more relatable it is. It was, 'Billy, just tell your story. Don't worry about the rest of that.'" Adds Apatow, "My instinct is always that if people care about the characters, they'll love the movie. I've watched this with a bunch of crowds and the experience has always been joyous. What I took from those crowds was that we've been ready for this for a really long time."



Above: Bobby and Aaron, ready to take the next step? **Right:** Wanda, Angela and Cherry work the room.







Above: Cinematographer Brandon Trost, producer Josh Church and director Nicholas Stoller on set. **Left:** Smitten much? Bobby, Aaron, massive turkey.



IT HAS STILL

not fully sunk in for Eichner that this has happened. Stoller says he's had to repeatedly convince his star that they'd be allowed to make the movie. "I don't think he ever believed me when I told him [Universal] would want to do this," he says. "It's like PTSD or something. It's horrible. I think he's been told 'no' so many times that he didn't believe they'd let us do this. I don't think he believed me until the movie was locked."

It only began to seem real for Eichner the first time he showed the movie to an audience in his hometown of New York City. "I've never been more nervous in my entire life," he says. "I had no idea how people were going to react." As Eichner remembers it, the movie played exceptionally well. After it finished, he stood, quietly hidden to one side, in the lobby as people left. He wanted to listen to the reactions, not just read test scores.

"I was watching people coming out — straight and gay — and it was so emotional." His voice catches. "Now *I'm* getting emotional. I think in addition to the story being moving, I hope there's a bigger story at play here, which is that you're watching the movie in a *movie theatre*. It's different to watching at home. It's powerful and communal. We've watched romantic comedies in this way for years, but never about a gay couple." Eichner hadn't realised quite what it would mean to prove to himself that his childhood belief was right. He *could* do that. "It's something that really caught me off guard," he says. "It's weird to say this about my own movie, but I'm just reacting to what I was seeing; I didn't realise how profound an experience it would be for people."

Eichner began working on *Bros* five years ago. The first time he spoke to *Empire* about it was this May, when he discussed how, in 2017, "we weren't where we are now, in terms of queer content and [public acceptance]". When we speak again, in July, things have changed in America. In June, as part of his published opinion on the overturning of Roe v. Wade, Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas stated that the court should "reconsider" the right to same-sex marriage in America, and even the legality of gay sex. *Bros*, a light-hearted romcom with jokes about trying to take photos of your own bum and the proper etiquette of group sex, has become, unintentionally, a bold protest.

"I never imagined how politically relevant it would be," says Eichner. It's taken five years, plus the entire lifetime of cinema, to get to this point, where a mainstream American film can show LGBTQ+ people being happy, messy, loving and ridiculous in a way that has always been possible for straight people. And Eichner hopes that people, of whatever sexuality, will watch it as the fun entertainment it's meant to be and by doing so "send a statement to all these evil, homophobic motherfuckers who want to drag us back to a time when we were scared to be ourselves." He'd simply like for everyone to be welcome and see that even if "love is love is love" is just a slogan, love is for everybody. And even the most ardent evil, homophobic motherfucker isn't going to stop that.

***BROS* IS IN CINEMAS FROM 28 OCTOBER**

LOUDMOUTH

THE BEST OF BILLY ON THE STREET



PAUL RUDD

Would you have sex with Paul Rudd in return for a dollar? Apparently, some New Yorkers would refuse to bump uglies with Hollywood's most loveable man, even in exchange for cash. Rudd, of course, takes the rejection sweetly. Even when one man tries to haggle the price up.



CHRIS PRATT

A humbling moment for Pratt, the newly fêted star of *Guardians Of The Galaxy* and *Jurassic World*, when Manhattanites are asked to offer their thoughts on his career. Unfortunately, the vast majority haven't the slightest idea who he is. In fact, people only get excited when they're told he's Josh Duhamel.



JULIANNE MOORE

This show is best when the guest really commits. And Moore *commits*. Delivering an 'Acting Attack', Moore performs some of her most famous monologues to strangers, for a dollar. The woman who gets a sweary, tear-drenched recital of Moore's *Magnolia* meltdown gets history's greatest bargain.



WILL FERRELL

Billy meets his screaming match in Will Ferrell. In Christmas onesies, the pair run around spreading festive dismay as they quiz the public on the best Christmas movies and berate a man for refusing to show gratitude for a generous gift of a bale of hay.

The Bomb

SHE'S THE MOST COMPLEX, TALKED-ABOUT, SPECTACULAR ICON OF OUR TIME. AND DIRECTOR ANDREW DOMINIK REVEAL HOW THEY RAMPED UP

bSHeLL

AND NOW MARILYN MONROE HAS THE FILM TO MATCH. STAR ANA DE ARMAS THEIR AMBITION FOR THE EXPLOSIVE *BLONDE*

WORDS HELEN O'HARA



FOR MORE THAN A DECADE, Andrew Dominik kept having ideas about *Blonde*. It was, frankly, inconvenient. He had first written the script for his adaptation of Joyce Carol Oates' sprawling 2000 novel of the same name, an examination of celebrity, trauma and self-invention told through the story of Marilyn Monroe, in 2008. But fresh additions and tweaks occurred to him regularly.

"The book will take a chapter of her life and it's like a broken mirror; there are these shards," says Dominik. "The thing I liked about the book was the opportunity within it to detail the childhood drama and some mistaken ideas that she inherits from her mother, and then to show an adult life through the lens of those ideas. It's this whirlwind of anxiety, trying to pull fragments and make meaning out of them. I wanted the film to keep that feeling that the past is always there. She's never escaped it."

Monroe's life was almost too dramatic: she fought her way from an impoverished childhood, much of it in foster homes, past predators and studio hostility to Hollywood stardom and fame as one of the world's great beauties, a platinum-blonde idol. But failed marriages and health problems that saw her popping pills led to her early death at 36, cementing a legend that became myth. All of which Dominik's adaptation covers.

But when it came to actually making the film, no-one would fund it. There was almost a Naomi Watts incarnation in 2011, but that came to nothing; another attempt with Jessica Chastain in 2014 failed to reach production. And while the money men baulked, still Dominik dreamed up new ideas, new moments, new visions.

"It's the film I most wanted to make, of all of them," says Dominik, who made his name with *Chopper* and *The Assassination Of Jesse James By The Coward Robert Ford*, films which also focus on self-created, larger-than-life personalities. "And it broke my heart so many times. But I couldn't stop thinking about it."

One hold-up was the uncompromising way that he wanted to shoot it. There would be black-and-white and colour, changing aspect ratios, locked camera and handheld and even body cameras, swaying with the character wearing them. There would be shots of Monroe's womb and conversations held with a foetus; even be a nightmarish vagina POV shot. This would not be another movie-star biopic; it would be a film examining the American Dream, the mythologies we all carry, life itself.

'The book is not factually accurate, it's not even concerned with that," says the director. "The movie is about the *meaning* of Marilyn Monroe." For Dominik, the book's Monroe became a sort of Superman figure: a child born from pain and loss who creates a persona that allows them to fly. The difference is that instead of being super-strong, this 20th-century icon was hopelessly vulnerable. Oates, incidentally, compared the subject of her 700-page opus to another American touchstone, saying it was "my *Moby Dick*, the powerful galvanising image about which an epic might be constructed, with myriad levels of meaning and significance". The film's title becomes almost a joke: if Dominik succeeds as he hopes, this will be the antithesis of a dumb *Blonde*.







Clockwise from far left: Recreating Marilyn Monroe's iconic 'Diamonds Are A Girl's Best Friend' scene from 1953's *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*; Director Andrew Dominik filming with Ana de Armas; Bobby Cannavale as The Ex-Athlete; Adrien Brody as The Playwright.

IN 2019 — THE PROJECT PERHAPS GIVEN fresh relevance after the horrors of the #MeToo revelations, perhaps because its time had simply come — Dominik got his chance to make the film, with the not inconsiderable help of Brad Pitt's production company Plan B, which had been on board *Blonde* since 2012. (The two had worked together before, on Dominik's *Jesse James*). Now all he had to do was actually put all those ideas on screen.

"It's a dream film," he says, trying to sum it up for *Empire* from his home in LA. "It's about the unconscious overwhelming the rational. It's trafficking in imagery that we're familiar with, but trying to remake the meaning of that imagery according to her internal drama. So it does whatever it needs to do at a particular point in time to get its point across. It's not interested in having a consistent style."

The search for his star soon led him to Ana de Armas, then shooting *Knives Out* for Rian Johnson, and not yet the breakout star of both that and the latest Bond, *No Time To Die*. "When I first met Andrew," remembers de Armas, speaking to *Empire* from New York (where she's in training for *John Wick* spin-off *Ballerina*), "he had been over ten years preparing for this movie, and he wanted to put those ten years into my mind in a very short time. His passion and vision were so contagious. Immediately I thought, 'I trust this man.'"

Dominik starts the film relatively simply, as the young Norma Jeane (Lily Fisher) and her troubled mother Gladys (Julianne Nicholson) struggle to keep heads above water in 1930s Los Angeles. But as time passes and the adult Norma Jeane, now played by Ana de Armas and calling herself Marilyn Monroe, winds her way through the Hollywood of the 1950s and early 1960s, the style begins to flicker and shift with her journey.

Much of the film's changing style (maybe not the vagina cam) is drawn from posed images of Monroe, many of them iconic. "Andrew gave us a bible of 700-and-something pictures," says de Armas. "The whole movie was in this bible, picture by picture, every scene. That's the relation between the black-and-white and colour; it's because of the pictures, it's not random. You want the audience to immediately engage, even in their subconscious, to something that they've already seen, and get them into the story."

Carefully stage-managed photo shoots become the basis for unstudied scenes of intimacy, as Dominik breaks down the divide between the public and private life of his star, between Marilyn and Norma Jeane. "There's something disturbing about it," explains Dominik. "Seeing imagery that's familiar but not quite right. It's like déjà vu or something."

To enhance that feeling of being close but not quite, Dominik shot in "the most expensive place in the world to make a film", LA. It was a strain, on a budget of $22 million for a nearly three-hour period drama, but it meant they could film in the same apartment where Norma Jeane lived as a child, and the bungalow that Marilyn later made her final home, grounding the film's wilder flights in something true.

WHEN DE ARMAS WAS 18, SHE MOVED from her native Cuba to Madrid to act. She rented a tiny studio apartment, her first adult home, and attempted to create a division between the bed and living space with a screen divider. That screen had Marilyn Monroe's face all over it — halfway around the world, 50 years after she died. A testament to the universality of Monroe's appeal.

"Everyone in the world loves her," nods de Armas. "As much as she's an American icon, she transcends that. She feels very close to people. Everyone feels like there is a version of her that is the one they like, or the one that they want to see. No-one is like her, no-one looks like her. It's impossible."

Up to three hours of hair and make-up each day ensured that de Armas *does* look like her, uncannily so at times, but the actor never relied on that. She felt a responsibility to Monroe, and her legions of fans, to do her justice. De Armas learned as much about the real person as possible, and then channelled that as she ›



tackled the script's Monroe. She had, after all, very real examples to hand of how Monroe touched people's lives. On *Knives Out* she was working with Jamie Lee Curtis, daughter of *Some Like It Hot* star Tony, and Christopher Plummer, who told her about his brief encounter with Marilyn when he was a young actor.

"He went out to dinner with her and someone asked if she wanted matzo-ball soup," smiles de Armas. "And she said, 'I didn't know matzos had balls.' It was this very cute comment, very endearing." But the actor needed more. During every free hour on the *Knives Out* set, de Armas studied Monroe's speech patterns and movements, listening to audio recordings and watching her films. Monroe's voice wasn't always that breathy, girlish purr for which she's known; she could sound shrill on unguarded audio tapes recorded towards the end of her life, or more mannered under her early drama coaches. De Armas had to master them all — and also get under the skin of a woman who could never afford to give in to anger or risk losing the life she'd built.

Dominik believed that de Armas could be great in the role. "Marilyn had that thing where she could make the movie all about what's going on with her, where you care about her," he says. "Ana has the same thing. I would have been fucked if I hadn't had Ana. I didn't realise how good she was until we started."

Still, he worried at first. What if he was wrong? What if she couldn't handle the pressure? Her first demanding scene — a devastating emotional reunion between Marilyn and her mother on only the second day of shooting — was great on the first take, which was reassuring. But a camera error meant they had to go again, and de Armas was solid but not spectacular on her second try. When she immediately asked for a third take before the director could, he knew he'd made the right call. With the cameras still going — after two documentaries (on Nick Cave), the director likes to film on digital and just keep rolling between takes for a smoother shoot — de Armas stepped outside briefly, came back and "stared the room down", as Dominik remembers it, before returning to her mark, while the tension climbed and everyone waited to see what their Marilyn could do. Then she smashed the scene out of the park. "It was fucking mind-blowing," remembers Dominik.

The shoot wasn't easy for either of them: he woke up every morning convinced that the day's schedule was impossible, and somehow managed it anyway. She, meanwhile, felt "heavy" with the character, but found a way to feed that back into her work. "I was insecure about my voice, about the accent, about the choreography, about working with American actors who know her better than me, everything!" says de Armas. "But all of that was exactly what *she* would be feeling. So it was incredible. Even though it seems like everything was very sad, and a lot of crying and traumatic things were going on, we had a great time."

She even felt a sense that Monroe was watching over her, "like a blessing, truly", particularly when she had to precisely recreate scenes from Monroe's films. One of those sees her as Sugar Kane in *Some Like It Hot*, trying to break up ice for a bootleg liquor party in a train bathroom. The real Monroe's hair was dishevelled in the scene, and the make-up artist on set kept fiddling with de Armas' hair, constantly trying to







Clockwise from far left: Off script; Behind the scenes with de Armas and Dominik; Blondes have more fun?; Dancing queens: Choreographer Denna Thomsen shows de Armas some moves.

get it just right. It was only when de Armas went to look at the two monitors, showing her work next to Monroe's original, that she realised the crew member had mistaken the one showing the real Monroe for the one with her. The illusion was complete. Dominik's vision was coming to life.

AFTER THE 2019 SHOOT, DOMINIK BEGAN a long and detailed edit, skipping potential Venice or Cannes bows to relentlessly fine-tune his vision — even as his new distributor, Netflix, raised some qualms about the sexual content and wild style of the film. "Andrew did not compromise, not once," says de Armas. "He pushed back. This movie has had a long journey, not only before being made, but also after. It's a film that that is supposed to create controversy and discomfort, and it's supposed to make you think about what happened — and what is still happening. It's revolutionary, and I think it's so brave."

Blonde might have been made years earlier, if not for Dominik's determination to make exactly the film he had in his head — including sex scenes with remarkably witty visual metaphors, and Monroe's abortions and miscarriages. There's also a non-graphic but upsetting sexual assault by a studio head who then gives her her big break — a plot point with an unwelcome continuing relevance in the age of #MeToo. It all led to a surprising NC-17 rating in the United States.

"It always came from great respect [for] and understanding of that trauma," says de Armas of the film. "Despite the NC-17 rating, I never felt that there was anything exploitative. This movie is meant to be an experience, to move along with her feelings, what she's going through. And that, unfortunately, takes what it takes. Whether we were shooting an abortion scene, dealing with abuse, nudity, happy sex, unhappy sex, it is so important to show the reality of it. It's not that I enjoy walking naked around set. But in this case, I had to give myself to it, to the fragility and the strength and the sexuality and everything that goes with it. Because we're all of that. And it feels real and honest."

Netflix stood by Dominik over its US rating, but did apparently have concerns about the film's length and, well, weirdness. They brought in editor Jennifer Lame (*Hereditary*, *Tenet*), to make some changes — but she merely noted some ways that Dominik might tighten up the first three reels, which he happily accepted. Reports of an edit war were, he says, overblown.

"I think there was a kind of shock at what the movie was, and [the thought that] maybe if it was a little less extreme, more people would like it," he says now. "You know, somebody pays for a movie, it's perfectly reasonable to let them have an opinion about it, and sometimes they're right. But Netflix have been really supportive. *Blonde* is a very lucky movie, in that regard."

It won't be for everyone. After the recent Supreme Court decision on abortion, even showing a foetus and portraying a woman ambivalent about having an abortion is likely to be wildly controversial. But then, neither the star nor the director ever expected this film to get an easy ride, because its ambitions go far beyond what's traditional for films about movie stars.

"I'm not concerned with being fair to anyone except the character," says Dominik. "We see it from her point of view; we're the only ones that understand her. The primary relationship is between the viewer and the character, not between [her] and the other characters. Really, I tried to tell the story of every human being, because I think that fundamentally we all misunderstand the world. Everybody sees the world through a story they carry inside them, their own mythology. Marilyn sees the drama she carries within her and the world reflecting that back at her. It's the psychological experience of being a human being. That's what the movie is trying to show."

One thing is for sure. Dominik is no longer prodded along by bigger and better ideas for *Blonde*; that impulse has gone quiet. But if the film succeeds as he hopes, a whole new generation will be haunted by the tragedy of Marilyn Monroe.

***BLONDE* WILL BE IN SELECT CINEMAS FROM 21 SEPTEMBER AND ON NETFLIX FROM 28 SEPTEMBER**





AS EXPLOSIVE ACTION-DRAMA **GANGS OF LONDON** RETURNS,

DIRECTOR CORIN HARDY, STAR ṢỌPẸ́ DÌRÍSÙ AND MORE TELL US

HOW THEY DESIGNED AND EXECUTED A BRUTAL DEATH-MATCH

WORDS CHRIS HEWITT

GANGS

FIGHT

ṢỌPẸ, ARE YOU UP FOR IT?



Here: Ṣọpẹ́ Dìrísù returns as Elliot Finch.

It's a freezing-cold February day in an east London studio that clearly is impervious to heat. *Empire* is huddled around a monitor with Corin Hardy, lead director of the second season of *Gangs Of London*, partially to stay warm, but mainly to watch Hardy and his crew shoot a sequence that will serve as the audience's re-introduction to Elliot Finch, the show's nominal hero, played by Ṣọpẹ́ Dìrísù.

The first season of *Gangs Of London* (in which, you'll never believe it, a number of criminal gangs battled each other in London) quickly established itself as one of the finest action shows on television, with co-creator and lead director, Gareth Evans, pulling off the kind of bloody mayhem usually reserved for the big screen. When Evans stepped back from the second season to focus on his upcoming Tom Hardy-starring action movie *Havoc*, Hardy (Corin, not Tom) — who had directed several episodes of that first season — graduated to showrunner.

Hardy's sensibilities are different from Evans', but he's no less of an action junkie and wanted to keep his foot firmly on the gas. "When I was finishing off Episode 9 of Season 1, I had so many thoughts of where this could go," he says. "I wanted to take the ball and run with it, and part of my challenge was to concoct a series of set-pieces and action sequences throughout the eight episodes that weren't repetitions of what we've seen before. So we've got hand-to-hand, home invasions, shootouts in Billingsgate Fish Market, and some car action."

He's aided in this endeavour by Dìrísù, the show's breakout star. A rare combination of superb dramatic actor and natural physical performer, Dìrísù was a surprise package first time around, equally at home with Elliot's existential struggle as an undercover cop slowly drawn to the very people he's meant to take down as he was beating the living crap out of a pub full of wrong'uns, armed only with a dart and an ashtray.

And now he's back. The sequence we're party to today is a bruising encounter that involves grappling, strangling, gouging, fake tongues, bulging eyes, and the world's strongest man. And before Hardy yells, "Action!" on each take, a member of the show's stunt team yells out, "Ṣọpé, are you up for it?"

As it turns out, he is. Very much so. Here, he, Hardy, and key members of the cast and crew break down a pivotal sequence set in a launderette blow by punishing blow, telling us *exactly* what Dìrísù was up for.

THE HERO

Off the back of an incredible debut season, Dìrísù, the unknown quantity, is no longer unknown. And so Hardy leans into that with a sequence which reacquaints viewers with a very different Elliot, one year after the final episode of Season 1. He's no longer a cop, for one, and has gone to work for The Investors, the mysterious organisation manipulating each of the gangs from afar. "He's effectively become an international assassin/dogsbody, doing all the grunt work for this faceless organisation," says Dìrísù. "And it's really starting to wear and weigh on his soul."

Which is why we meet him in Istanbul, making short work of a rival gang's enforcers. Introductions are important to Hardy, who looked to a classic when he was mulling over how best to stage Elliot's big entrance. "I was inspired by the way we meet Indiana Jones in *Raiders Of The Lost Ark*," says Hardy. "It's a classic 'introducing the hero' shot, but I wanted to do a *Gangs* equivalent, with a trail of death that leads into meeting our hero." So it begins.







Top, left to right: Never use someone's Daz without asking; Corin Hardy (in the mask) mounts the scene; A goon gets it in the neck — the minor role was played by twins.







Far left: Death by washing machine.
Above: Storyboards of the sequence.

THE SPIN CYCLE

Hardy, along with director of photography Björn Charpentier, devised a lengthy (90 seconds or so) tracking shot that starts on a spinning washing machine, before pulling back to reveal that we're in a Turkish launderette that is actually a cover for a criminal enterprise. And things are going down. As the camera glides along the corridor, we see and hear flashes of violence. "This shot takes you past more washing machines and dry cleaners," says Hardy. "And then you hear these sounds and we reveal a dead body, which is a man who has been shoved through a washing machine that's churning his head around, and the blood is mixing with the soap suds from the washing machine."

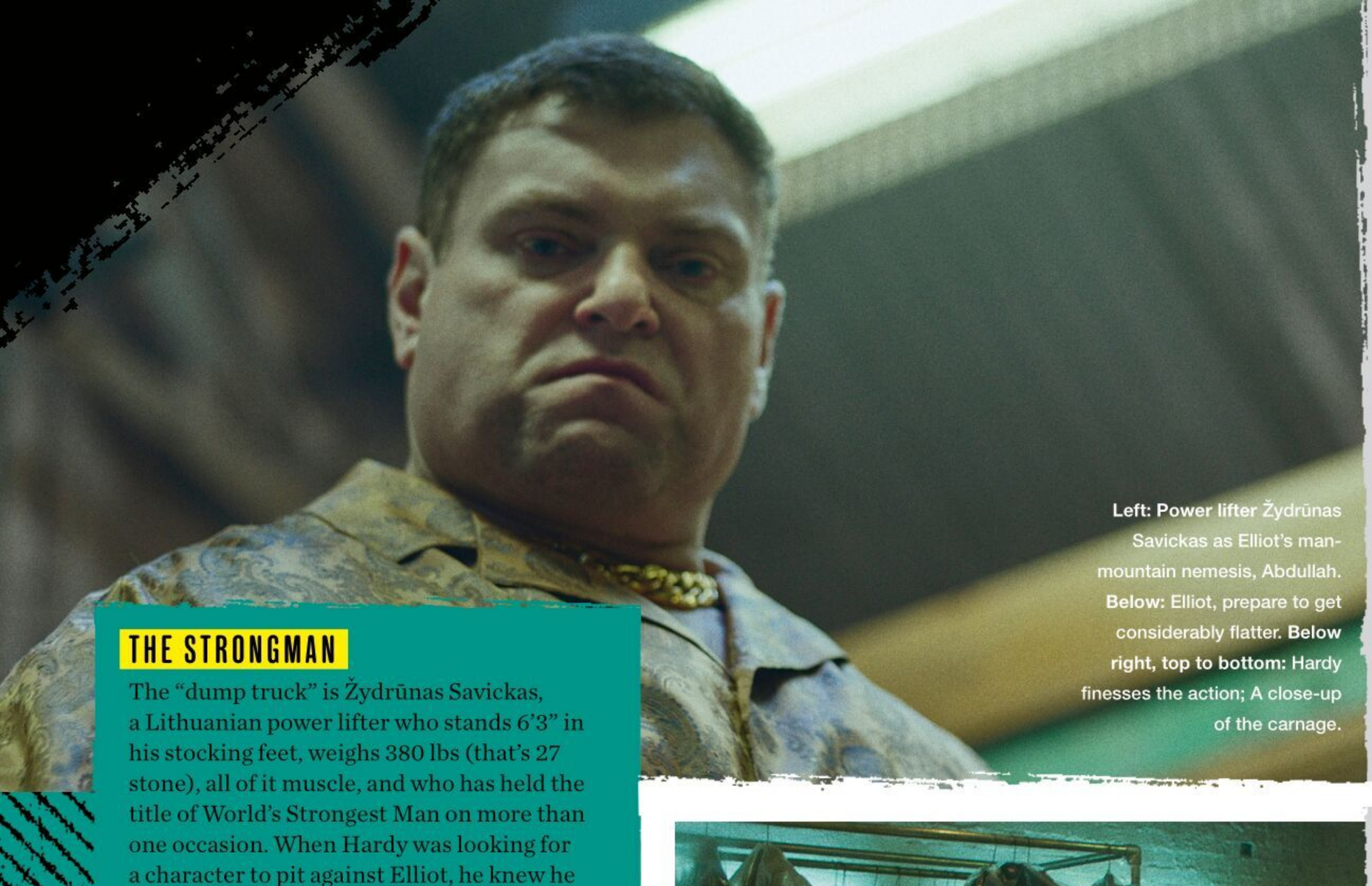
After that comes more violence as the camera creeps further into the launderette, past racks of drying clothes. A man runs into a cloud of steam and emerges seconds later with a knife in his neck (fun fact: this gangster was played by twins, allowing Hardy to "run the same shot several times without stopping and doing make-up on the same guy"). "The idea was that the camera is always right behind the action," says Charpentier. "We don't see Elliot fight; we just see the result of the fight."

Until, through some double doors, we finally meet Elliot, bedraggled and dishevelled after working his way through some Turkish minions. "Elliot is exhausted, he's ragged, he's drunk, he's just fought his way through nine men," says Hardy. Elliot is not in a good place, literally and figuratively.

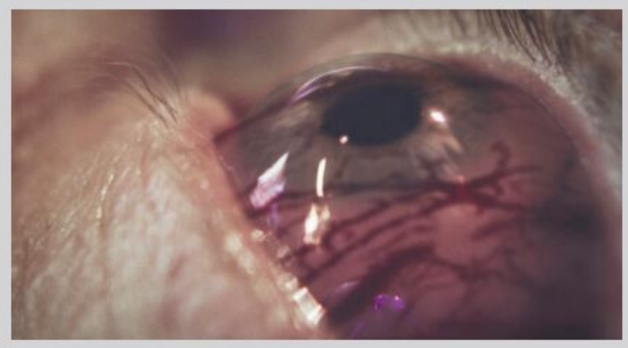
So the sequence was designed to reflect that — finding Elliot emerging from the shadows, hiding in the murk and mire. With an ever-encroaching schedule, Hardy set about "bending time" to nail the sequence. "We shot this over three days, and at two different locations," says Charpentier. "One was a real laundry room with machines that were operational. It took a lot of thinking to see how we could put those two rooms together so that it could still play out as a single camera-move."

Their solution was to break the sequence down into two distinct parts, both shooting in the same studio, allowing Hardy to whizz back and forth between the tracking shot and another room where he and Charpentier could tick off some elements of the big fight that caps the sequence. "On one side of a door," says Hardy, "we've got this crane making its way up and down this alleyway of death. And then on the other side, we have complex fight choreography. It's part of the art of scheduling, an underappreciated part of filmmaking."

And at the end of the tracking shot, the camera comes to rest on Elliot. For Dìrísù, the focus was more on staying in character than looking cool for the camera. "I'm taking steps to make sure the camera gets all that 'hero' stuff rather than me puffing out my chest or staring longingly into the distance," he says. "But you don't sit in that moment too long. Just as you think you're getting the full effect, the dump truck comes and takes him out."







Left: Power lifter Žydrūnas Savickas as Elliot's man-mountain nemesis, Abdullah. **Below:** Elliot, prepare to get considerably flatter. **Below right, top to bottom:** Hardy finesses the action; A close-up of the carnage.

THE STRONGMAN

The "dump truck" is Žydrūnas Savickas, a Lithuanian power lifter who stands 6'3" in his stocking feet, weighs 380 lbs (that's 27 stone), all of it muscle, and who has held the title of World's Strongest Man on more than one occasion. When Hardy was looking for a character to pit against Elliot, he knew he wanted to supersize that meal. "The fight was devised around trying to start Elliot off with the sort of formidable challenge that might be the end of him," says Hardy. "We weren't looking for the strongest man in the world, but we found him."

Initially, the idea was to pit Elliot against a sumo wrestler type, and a German sumo wrestler was cast. However, when he dropped out just a couple of days before filming, an exhaustive search for a replacement threw up Savickas' name. "It required a really unique character," says Tim Connolly, the show's fight coordinator (Allen Jo also worked on the sequence). "We needed somebody who could do their own action, and we needed someone who, if they lay on top of you, could suffocate you. We needed that visual aspect."

As with the first season, the fight choreography on *Gangs* is a time-consuming affair, involving much pre-visualisation and rehearsal, often with stunt people and choreographers coming up with the moves that Dìrísù and his co-stars/opponents will replicate later. And while that had been the case for the showdown between Elliot and Savickas' character (Abdullah), once they got to set, Dìrísù found that some things just weren't going to be the same at all. "We had the other stunt guys working with me, pretending to be him," says Dìrísù. "But no-one could match his dimensions. So there is this renegotiation. Where I throw my punches is massively different. I had to throw, like, a whole foot higher."

Rather than the intricate choreography of previous *Gangs* dust-ups, which had heavily placed the emphasis on martial-arts prowess, this battle was designed to be a very different beast. "I didn't want it to be martial arts," says Hardy. "We had to tailor the fight to Žydrūnas' physical abilities as well. The fighting style was built to be a lot more open-handed, because we haven't seen that aspect in *Gangs* before."

THE BURLY BRAWL

For the most part, the life-and-death struggle is sweaty and intense; a grappling match with Savickas lying on top of Dìrísù on set — not a little uncomfortable. "He's a Bowser of a man, and I'm a little Super Mario next to him," laughs Dìrísù. "I did have a little shout at Corin at one point because even though we're making it as safe and comfortable as possible, it still fucking hurts, this man mountain lying on top of me. Corin did apologise — he thought I was indestructible!"

But there was one beat that simply could not be done with the two of them in the same shot, which posed quite a conundrum. It involves Elliot getting the upper-hand by crushing Abdullah's lower leg; specifically, his knee, which causes the big man to topple suddenly, landing on top of Elliot. Impossible in real life, not just to take care of Savickas' knees ("For sure, the legs is the most important part of my body for my sport," says Savickas), but to also spare Dìrísù from being made into so much mulch.

"When I saw the pre-viz and they told me that Žydrūnas was going to land on top of me, I was like, 'Well, that's instant death, isn't it?'" says Dìrísù. "Like, how does anyone survive that? Because even when he laid gently on top of me, all of Elliot's struggle and panic and inability to















breathe was NAR — no acting required."

Hardy and Charpentier's solution was to shoot the fall as a composite shot comprised of several passes, with Savickas falling onto a green mat in one pass, and Dìrísù pretending to have the wind knocked out of him on another, with the two stitched together seamlessly in post. It also allowed for some inventive visuals, with the camera falling in unison with Abdullah's thumping, timber-like tumble. "We built a very simple rig so that the camera can rotate 90 degrees," says Charpentier, "and you always have the same speed so we can shoot both shots."

THE TAKEDOWN

Season 1 routinely bumped off major characters in a style that made *Game Of Thrones* look sedate, and Season 2 is going to have plenty of shocks in store. But fear not — Elliot isn't going to go out in the first episode, no matter how big the guy facing him. With Abdullah's kneebone no longer connected to his thigh-bone, Elliot takes advantage of the big man's agony to finish the job by strangling him to death. Which allows Hardy's horror-obsessive side to surface. As Abdullah struggles for breath, his face gets redder, his eyes bulge, and his tongue lolls out of his mouth. "With *Gangs*, I want things to become very iconic and visual," says Hardy. "As Elliot finally gets him where he wants him, you see his eyes reverberate with tension and his tongue starts to swell."

The bulging eyes were taken care of by Savickas straining hard until he nearly popped his peepers out of their sockets. "It was probably the toughest part," he says. "You can do with muscles everything you want, but acting with eyes is the hard part." The tongue, though, was taken care of by prosthetics designer Richard Martin, who presented various options in a Tupperware box, as if they were a packed lunch. "We made a series of tongues in different shapes that we could quickly insert into Žydrūnas' mouth, and he could puppeteer it slightly," says Martin. "There were two different stages of swelling. Corin was keen to have this Jabba The Hutt-esque, flappy, pointed tongue. I was the tongue-wrangler that day."

Hardy, who has a background in special effects, loves practical work. Which is why he didn't just watch Savickas pretend to die, choked to death by a gold dress that a desperate Elliot just about manages to grab and wrap around the behemoth's neck. Instead, Hardy walked over, stood beside Dìrísù and Savickas, and personally sprinkled gold sequins over them as their death-match elicited its death rattle.

"I love puppeteering," he laughs. "I always get involved with anything practical. And as the dress is stretched tight around Elliot's knee, I liked the image of these two men going at it with gold sequins showering down on them, and getting stuck in Elliot's beard. So if someone else is dropping the sequins, and they don't go where you want, you don't have time to reset. At least if it's me doing it, it's my problem." Tongue-based atrocities, death by dress, the world's strongest man being strangled — there's a good chance *Gangs Of London* may feature the year's greatest action sequins.

Far left, top to bottom: Hardy's sketches of the eye-bulging takedown; Pop! **Main:** The fight escalates. **Above, top to bottom:** Sketches of the swelling muscle; "Anyone fancy a tongue?" Hardy preps with Žydrūnas; A gilded kill.

***GANGS OF LONDON* SEASON 2 IS ON SKY ATLANTIC AND NOW LATER THIS YEAR**



WORDS CHRISTINA NEWLAND • **ILLUSTRATION** THE RED DRESS

LADY DYNAMITE

From 1970s pioneer to modern-day icon, the trailblazing PAM GRIER has always done things *her* way...



In this no-holds-barred interview, she tells *Empire* how she beat men at their own game — and transformed cinema

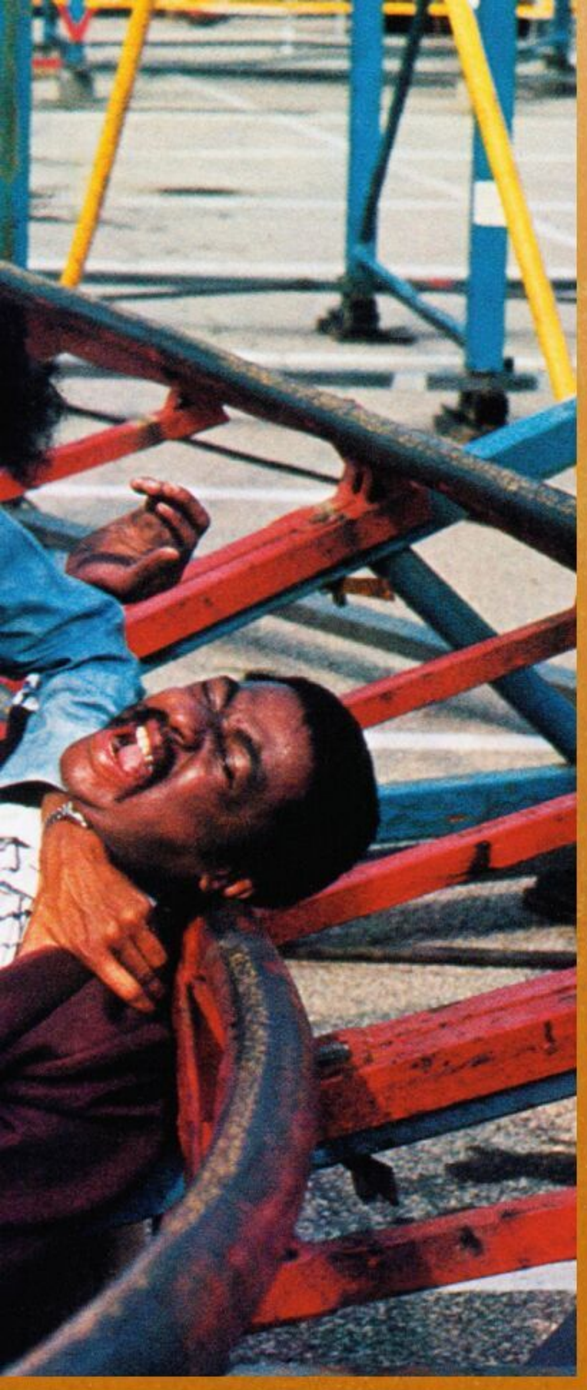
AMERICAN CINEMA OF the 1970s is unthinkable without Pam Grier: she of the fearsome stance and long, supple limbs, toting a sawn-off shotgun and a come-hither-if-you-dare look. And talking to her today, it's a joy to discover that that attitude hasn't diminished one jot. "I was frustrated with society's entitlement to women's bodies whenever they wanted, and with patriarchal society and how imbalanced it was," she says stridently of her pioneering screen career.

It's not an overstatement to say that Grier reinvented what it meant to be a woman on screen. She towered over her male co-stars, at least figuratively; in her female revenge classics of the blaxploitation genre, *Coffy* and *Foxy Brown* foremost among them, she became one of the only women of the 1970s to be able to carry a film on the strength of her name alone.

Talking to *Empire* on the phone from her ranch in Colorado, it seems the old tagline — "Wham! Bam! Here comes Pam!" (originally deployed on the poster for 1975's *Friday Foster*) — is still apt. At 73 years old, interviewing her still seems like being in a Pam-Grier-shaped whirlwind: she is warm and loquacious, shooting straight from the hip on the environment, feminism, toxic personalities in Hollywood, and her own past and present in the film industry.

"When I first worked on a film set, there was one scene where the actor raised his voice to me... and equally I raised my voice to his level. The director said, 'No. Women don't scream and shout and throw things at men,'" Grier says. "I said, 'Oh, really? If it's my culture, I'm gonna scream at him and throw a skillet at his ass.'"

Grier was a new kind of sex symbol — the kind that would just as soon shoot you as make love to you. She turned Hollywood on its head when, in 1975's *Sheba, Baby*, her PI squinted — as hard as Clint Eastwood — and asked her foe: "Have I bruised your masculinity?" In an era of tumult and racial strife, Grier came to embody the changing political consciousness of Black women in America. "[It] gave more bite to a redundant genre," she says. "Producers and directors















were responding to the fact that it wasn't just Bond girls anymore, but women being in a place of, 'You don't scare me. Let's fight fire with fire, if that's what I have to do to survive.'"

GRIER WAS, ACCORDING to Quentin Tarantino, when promoting *Jackie Brown* with her in 1997, the first female action-hero. There was, he said, certainly no white equivalent.

An army brat, a black belt in karate, and a woman who once had three fingernails broken by a table sent flying during a bar fight started by John Lennon: Grier has certainly lived plenty of life. The South Carolina native who was raised all over began in the gnarly, disreputable genre of sexploitation, with women-in-prison flicks like *The Big Doll House* (1971) and *Black Mama White Mama* (1973) for Roger Corman's B-movie factory AIP: a place where, regardless of the sordid materials in its films, an entire generation of filmmaking talent cut their teeth. "Roger Corman was a renaissance man," she says. "He had women be equal in physicality, in mentality, in sexuality."

When Grier and Corman first met, her background took the producer by surprise. "When my agents took me to meet him, they told him I was from Colorado," she explains. "'She skis and goes hunting and fishing.' Roger Corman and Jack Hill [director of *Coffy*] gave me the freedom to explore and to express to them what women did in rural areas — for example, that they were really very capable, could run farm equipment, take care of children and the land, and be physically powerful. And then be denigrated because they didn't have fancy clothes, and so on. Roger thought that would be something new, for women and women's empowerment."

Her stardom had been far from a sure bet. "They didn't think [1973's *Coffy*] was going to sell, having the first female Black heroine." But it did, going on to be a blaxploitation-circuit breakout hit and creating the mould for Grier as a vigilante-feminist icon. In the film she plays a nurse by day who is an avenging angel by night, searching back-alleys and dive bars for the drug pushers who have poisoned her addict sister. "Coffy was originally written for a white woman," Grier says. "But none of them felt comfortable with action and guns. And then it came to me because of my legacy with Roger Corman in five films. I brought that colour and a different culture to the filmmaking process. It said: 'Women are capable, and we're gonna fight.'"

Her rural background — and career — made it important for her to remain physically strong. Off screen, she was (and still is) tirelessly athletic, to the extent that brands would capitalise on it. As she recalls, ›

Clockwise from far left: Pam Grier, making a name for herself in 1974's *Foxy Brown*; In charge in *Sheba, Baby* (1975); *Black Mama White Mama* (1973); More high-action antics in *Sheba, Baby*; Prison drama *The Big Doll House* (1971); *Sheba, Baby*; As the titular model-turned-photographer in *Friday Foster* (1975); Breaking big in *Coffy* (1973).





"Because of my success doing action in films like *Coffy* and *Foxy Brown*, Kawasaki actually asked me, for *Sheba, Baby*, to use the first personal watercraft [in the film]. It was the first Jet Ski by Kawasaki. They asked if Pam would be comfortable, and it was like, 'Pam does everything!'"

She genuinely could: along with an exhaustive résumé of sports and martial-arts credits, she could fight too. "I love martial-arts movies," she explains. "I studied them on Air Force bases growing up, and there are quite a few martial arts developed by women."

She worked tirelessly, at one stage in the 1970s making 17 films in six years, earning herself a home in the Hollywood Hills, a yellow Jaguar, and enough money to, as she puts it, make sure her family was okay. "When our men came back from Vietnam — *if* they came back — sometimes they couldn't work. It was dependent on the young'uns, the moms, and the grandparents to go to work. When I became successful, I would buy tires and water-heaters for my family. They didn't get the opportunities. They had Jim Crow and racism and discrimination; they couldn't get an education." That survival spirit was deeply embedded. She had no choice.

AS SHE WROTE in her 2010 memoir *Foxy: My Life in Three Acts*, Grier suffered numerous instances of physical and sexual assault over the years. "When I was about six, at school, a young man behind me picked up a chair and hit me on the head," she tells *Empire*. "I had a concussion, a bleeding skull, and a stammer. And the white hospital wouldn't take me, so we had to go to the army hospital that would accept people of colour. That took two more hours. Then I was raped when I was seven by some relatives in the projects and it really traumatised me. Then a third [assault], by a football player and a friend of the family. And a fourth one that I fought off, when I was trying to get into the UCLA film school in California." As she points out, it wasn't until her memoir was published that she realised how shockingly common these stories were.



"People didn't know what had happened to me," she says of the book's release. "With the #MeToo movement, I couldn't go to enough events. I was weeping with pride. And we try not to pontificate to society and lose our ticket holders, because Hollywood is still entertainment," she says, ruefully. And there is currently a biopic of Grier in development, based on that memoir — with good reason. As she herself admits, many women would "struggle to tie their shoes" after what she has been through. Seeing what she calls her "strength to survive" depicted on the big screen may well be a tonic for many viewers.

In the 1970s, many commentators turned their noses up at her violent action flicks, and even distinguished members of the Black artistic and political community showed concern about how these films portrayed Black families, neighbourhoods, and life. Yet as Grier points out, she sometimes ended up more on the receiving end of criticism than her male contemporaries, like Richard Roundtree (*Shaft*) or Fred Williamson (*Black Caesar*).

"I think it was because they didn't want me to walk in a man's shoes and do a man's work," she says. "A lot of blaxploitation films were done with men before I stepped into those shoes. And as soon as I did, and brought up equality, all of a sudden it was an issue." Yet when she suggested ideas for different types of roles, she was often met with resistance. "I presented my studio with a film about Mary Fields, the first female stagecoach driver in Montana, and they said, 'No-one's gonna believe a Black woman driving a stagecoach,'" she recalls with disbelief. "Even Gary Cooper once wrote a story about Mary Fields. But they said no-one's gonna believe it. There are all these wonderful stories about the Black West. But I guess you have the good, the bad, and the stupid, and... that's the stupid. Black history was not taught the same way at school then."

In an attempt to seize better roles and to differentiate her image from the iconic Foxy Brown, Grier founded Brown Sun Productions in 1974. "You have to develop your audience every three to five years; they change in culture, economic background, what they respond to," she says. Her company mostly did research and development on various projects, but was short-lived. Grier was too far ahead of her time. In the '80s and '90s, she would work in a handful of notable films, including opposite Paul Newman in *Fort Apache, The Bronx* (1981) and under the direction of John Carpenter in *Escape From L.A.* (1996). In several other films, like director Andrew Davis' *Above The Law* (1988), she would meld her famed toughness into her persona as a hard-bitten policewoman or detective.

But then in 1997, to the funky strains of



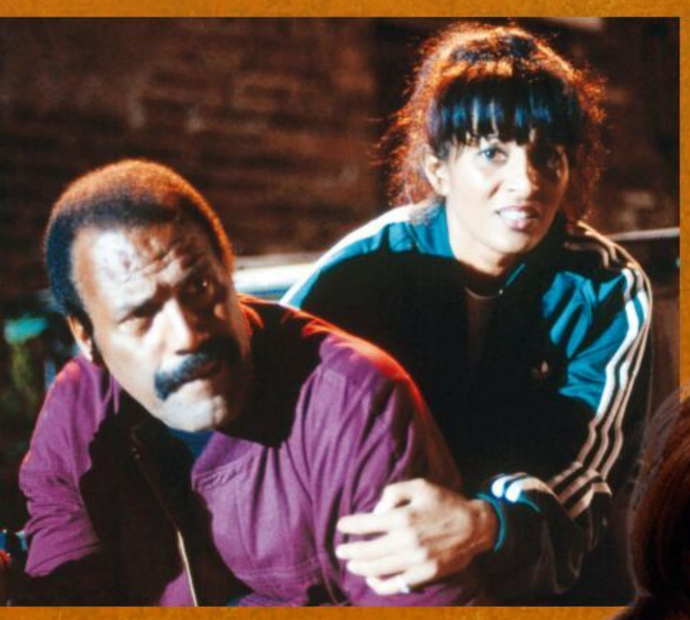




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Facing page, clockwise from left: With Snoop Dogg in ghost horror *Bones* (2001); Grier and Samuel L. Jackson in *Jackie Brown* (1997); Opposite Julia Roberts in *Larry Crowne* (2011). **Here, clockwise from left:** *Jackie Brown*; Taking on Kurt Russell in *Escape From L.A.* (1996); *Jackie Brown*; With Steven Seagal in *Above The Law* (1988); Alongside Fred Williamson in *Original Gangstas* (1996).







Bobby Womack's 'Across 110th Street', the Pam Grier we used to know strolled back into our lives. This month, Quentin Tarantino's *Jackie Brown* — Grier's favourite of her own films — has its 25th anniversary, and a concordant cinema re-release. Starring Grier in what is essentially a homage to her entire screen legend — wrapped inside an Elmore Leonard adaptation — Tarantino's heartfelt ode to this mature, wise, grown-up Pam Grier was a meaningful bookend to the earlier work she had done. (Reportedly, Tarantino had posters of her previous films up in his office when she arrived; she thought he'd put them there especially for her visit.)

"I got to swim in the ocean of Quentin Tarantino," Grier smiles of *Jackie Brown*. "He mentioned me in *Reservoir Dogs*, there's a mention of my name [as Mr Orange says, "*Christie Love* was like a Pam Grier TV show without Pam Grier"]. And then with *Pulp Fiction* and *Kill Bill*, he really showed what women could do." Around the time of *Jackie Brown*'s release in 1997, Grier was working on a handful of films that looked back with nostalgia and humour at her own past, including collaborations with Spike Lee's regular cinematographer, Ernest Dickerson, in *Bones* (2001) and Larry Cohen in *Original Gangstas* (1996). Both films featured prominent Black actors from films of that era, and riffed on the styles, music and '70s references that '90s hip-hop often harked back to.

Finally, it seemed, the world was catching on to Pam Grier.

GRIER IS MEDITATIVE about how audiences might appraise her films today, through a contemporary lens. "Young people have seen their moms become more independent and be an equal partner with their dads," she says. "In my generation, it was more lopsided. One person could go out and work and take care of the entire family. In my films, and in life, Gloria Steinem was my heroine. We wanted equality. Some of the biggest fights I had were with men who were on the dating scene. 'You don't need an education, I'll marry you and take care of you.' But then he can take it away when he wants. No — I'll have my independence."

It's difficult to summarise just how much has changed in her time in the film industry, but one of Grier's great takeaways is about the faces on set with her. "Certain subjects today wouldn't have worked 50 years ago," she says. "I used to be the only female on set. Now, [women are] in every position all the way up in the studios. We have executives, actors, writers, and crew. And everyone is bringing along their own cultures, or some are immigrants, or come from somewhere women have different issues to deal with. So you can tell a great story when you're curious. We need each other, and all of our stories and cultures to [be brought] to the table. That's how we come to solutions we never would have thought of before."

Talking with Pam Grier is like attending a masterclass in her own career, but also in how she sees the world — not too unlike one of her own characters, in a sense. She has played wise, weary women who know that it may be inevitable that the world — and men — will do you dirty. But it's what you do with that afterwards that matters. She sees Hollywood, and the world, and being a woman of colour in it, as a tough gig, where a little dash of cynicism and a sense of humour help a lot. Not to mention that black belt in karate.

Viewed now, her films may be a time capsule of a funky bygone era. Pam Grier's presence in them, though, is as powerful, and revolutionary, as it ever was.

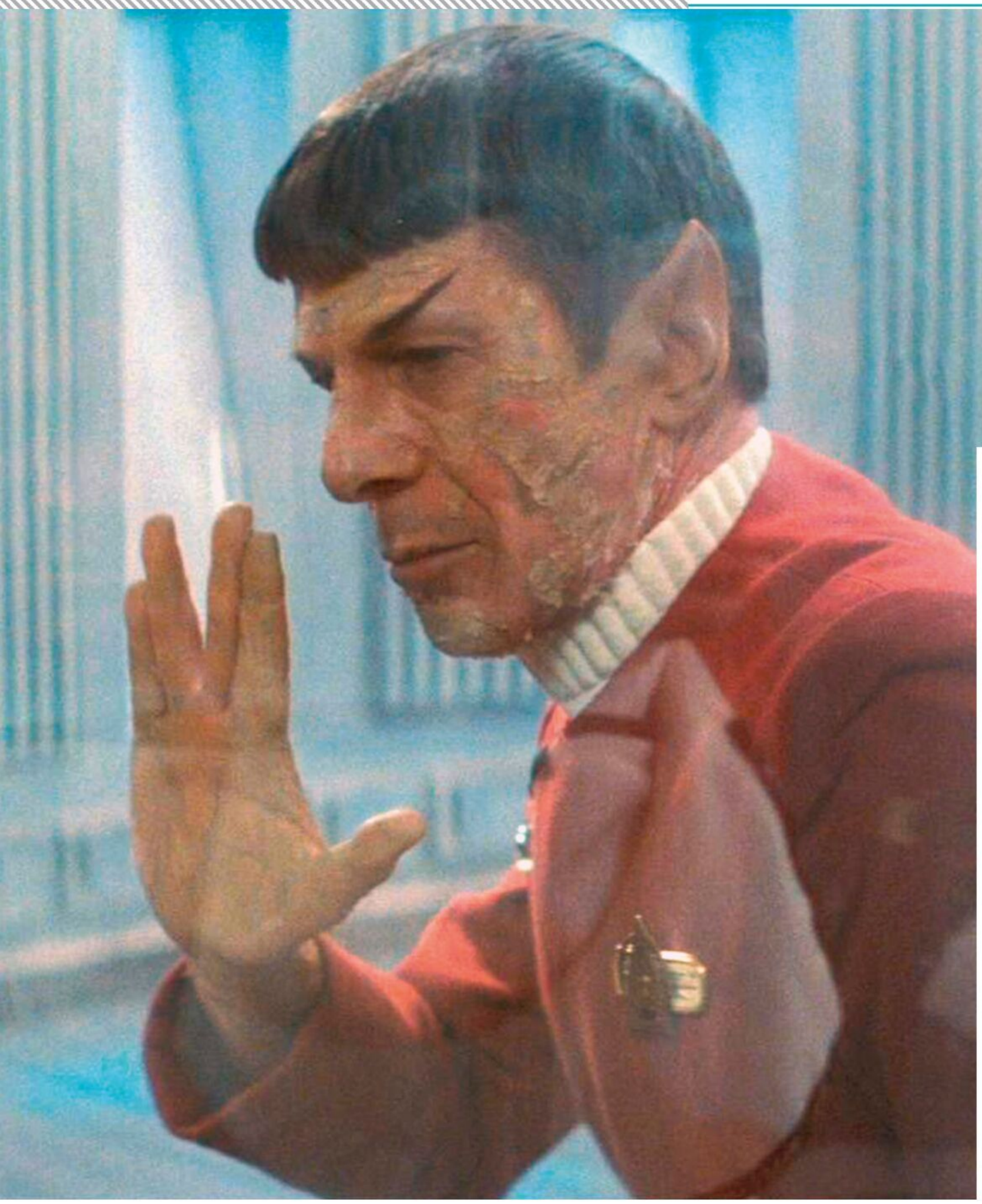
BFI SOUTHBANK'S PAM GRIER SEASON RUNS FROM 1 SEPTEMBER–4 OCTOBER. *JACKIE BROWN* IS IN CINEMAS FROM 16 SEPTEMBER

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INDISPENSABLE HOME ENTERTAINMENT [EDITED BY CHRIS HEWITT]
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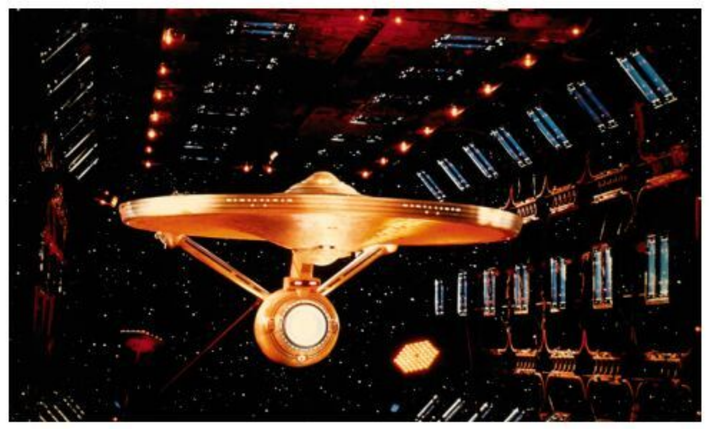


All Our Yesterdays

As the first two *Star Trek* movies hit 4K, the legendary WILLIAM SHATNER talks transferring *Trek* to the big screen









Clockwise from left: Spock's (Leonard Nimoy) farewell in *The Wrath Of Khan*; Kirk (William Shatner) cannae take it; *The Motion Picture*'s Enterprise money shot; Gene Roddenberry and *The Motion Picture* director Robert Wise look to the future with key cast.

THESE DAYS, WHEN it doesn't seem you can so much as open the fridge without finding a new *Star Trek* project in development next to the milk, it's hard to believe that in the early 1980s the franchise was at death's door. Cancelled in 1969 after three seasons and 79 episodes, attempts to revive it both as a low-budget movie and a new series had foundered. Worse was to come. *Star Trek: The Motion Picture* (1979) was a $40 million damp squib, lambasted by critics for its glacial pacing. But it made enough for a sequel in 1982, with creator Gene Roddenberry gently moved aside in favour of executive producer Harve Bennett and director Nicholas Meyer. And with *Star Trek II: The Wrath Of Khan* — which ditched the philosophical ponderings of the first movie, revived a classic villain, and put the relationships between the beloved crew front and centre — the series gloriously rediscovered its space legs. Now both films are getting the 4K re-release treatment, so we opened up a comms link with one of the last surviving original *Trek* cast members, Captain James T. Kirk himself: William Shatner.

This is going to be another trip down memory lane for you. Surely there can't now be anything about *Star Trek* that you haven't been asked?
[*Laughs*] Well, maybe I can come up with something that's fresh. It's all good. I always enjoy talking about it.

Do you remember how you felt when the show got cancelled?
The series had actually been slated for cancellation at the end of the second season. Then there was this write-in campaign, which may or may not have been orchestrated by Gene Roddenberry. I've never been quite clear about it. But in any case, it was successfully renewed until the end of the third season. So it wasn't a big surprise. We were very much aware that it was trembling on the edge of a precipice. But we — when I say "we" I mean the cast and the crew — were really involved in the show. We really all loved the show. And I for one had wanted it to continue. I was happy. But then we got a cancellation notice. And it was suddenly all over.

That must have been a tough time for you.
I had been in shows that stopped playing, whether it was on Broadway or a series. But that's part of being an actor. You're out of work a lot of the time. So with great reluctance I left the set on that last day. And personally, I'd just been divorced. All the money I had made was going into that divorce. So a couple of months after *Star Trek* I was really broke. I started doing what we call summer theatre. And I went with a truck and a camper on the back — you guys have another name for it...

Caravan?
Yes! A caravan. I went with a caravan, drove across the continent with my dog and did 13 ›

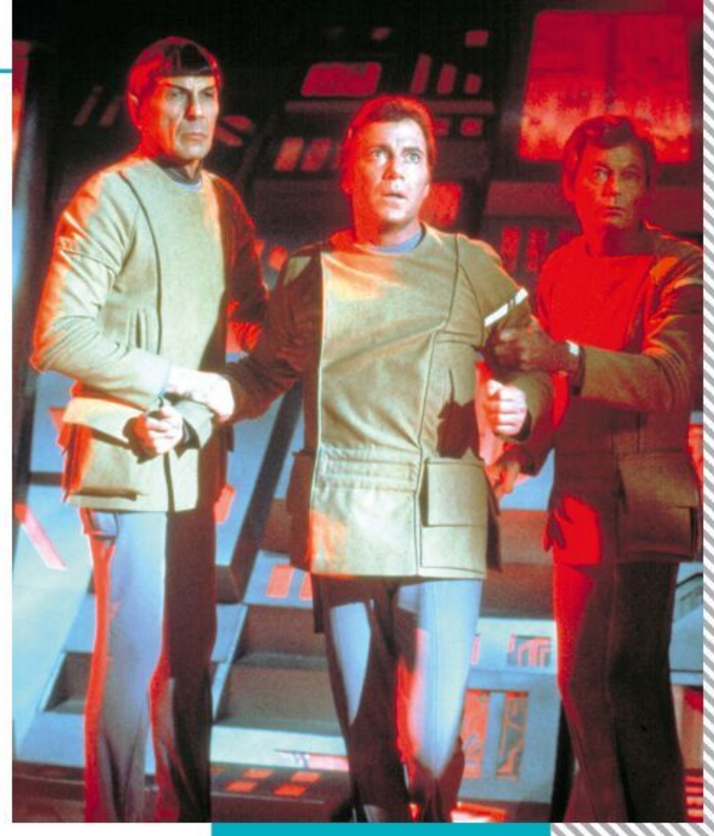
weeks of summer stock. I was making a living. I was earning some money to keep my kids fed and a roof over their heads. And gradually I was able to save some money. Six years went by and I'd get a call every so often: "We think we're doing another series," or, "We're thinking of doing a special with *Star Trek*", "We're thinking of doing a movie with *Star Trek*," and nothing happened. Until one day I was told that Robert Wise had been hired to do the movie. And so, for me, that's when it really became a fact.

What did you think of the screenplay for *The Motion Picture* when you first read it?
The basic story was, I thought, a really great science-fiction story. A machine goes out, a probe, is captured by machines that are alive and comes back, and for some reason wants to destroy the Earth [*laughs*]. It's a really good one-liner. It's really intriguing.

The Voyager probes had only been launched four or five years earlier. It was a smart idea to capitalise on that...
Yeah. And now, with the talk of AI becoming sentient, it's even more relevant. It brought up the question of, when does something transition into consciousness? That's what the plot of *The Motion Picture* was really about. It was a pretty deep science-fiction script. And when *Star Trek* was at its best, it asked those profound questions.

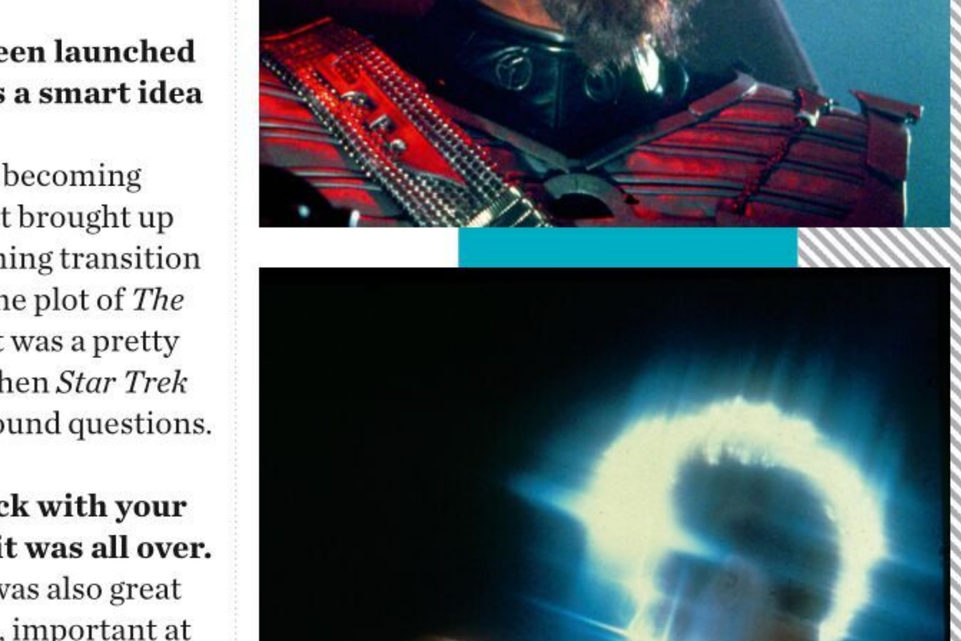
It must have been fun to get back with your castmates when you'd thought it was all over.
It was absolutely a delight. But it was also great to have somebody, in Robert Wise, important at the helm of this movie. We all had really high hopes. But then Wise was rushed. If I remember, there was a strike or something that wasted a period of time between the filming and the release. What many people really didn't realise was that Robert Wise, this great editor, really didn't have much of a chance to edit. Mainly the special effects. It was a very primitive time then compared to what it is today, so it took a lot longer to get the effects they wanted. The film was put together more hastily than Robert Wise would have liked. And when it premiered in Washington, the story is that the guy came running in with the cans of film under his arm. Today those flaws can be fixed more quickly, and that's the kind of thing that Wise would have done, had he had the time to finesse the film.

Despite its flaws, it's still a wonderful-looking film. That Enterprise reveal shot is a heartstopper.
Yeah, it's a huge big-screen moment. I think we have seen so many iterations of *Star Trek* that we've lost that sense of awe at the majesty of that spaceship. I was dazzled in wonderment at the movie. I was used to these TV shows.











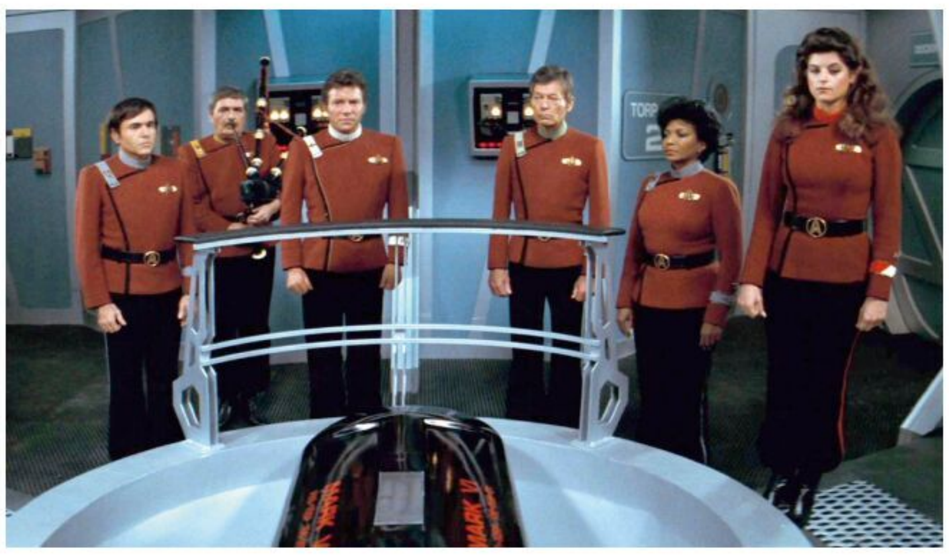
Here: Ricardo Montalban, bringing the wrath (and pecs) as Khan. **Left, top to bottom:** Spock, Kirk and Bones in their new *Motion Picture* uniforms; Mark Lenard (aka Sarek, Spock's dad) as the Klingon Captain; Ilia (Persis Khambatta) takes a shine to Decker (Stephen Collins); The groundbreaking Nichelle Nichols as Uhura.

The fact that it wasn't lauded was disappointing to all of us. And then, as I understand it, the head of Paramount, Charlie Bludhorn, went back home and said, "We're not going to do any more *Star Trek*," and his wife convinced him, because she loved *Star Trek*, to do more. So he put it into the arms of the television department and they made *Wrath Of Khan*.

Gene Roddenberry was kind of eased out of that movie, wasn't he?
Well, Gene's history is very interesting. When the series was made, he was moved up after the first 13 shows, and then we went on for two-and-a-half years after that. Then the show is cancelled and everybody goes their way. I always imagine that *Star Wars* comes out and it makes billions, so the executives at Paramount are sitting around wailing, "Look at that! We gotta do something!" And they knew nothing of the history so they brought in Roddenberry, who had been moved gracefully out of any position of making decisions on the original series. Then I don't know what battles he might have had, but



Below, top to bottom: Spock puts the needs of the many above the needs of his survival in *The Wrath Of Khan*; Spock's send-off by the crew, plus Kirstie Alley and some bagpipes.



now they're going to make a second movie and they begin to realise that Roddenberry is not the asset they thought he was. And he makes a deal to make a tremendous amount of money per movie that we make without him. You know, when they made *The Next Generation*, the same thing happened. They brought in somebody else. There's a whole history there. I don't talk much about it. Everybody has their flaws.

The two great masterstrokes were bringing Khan back and killing Spock...
Yeah. Khan was a wonderful villain. Wonderful at exposing his pectorals [*laughs*].

How was working with Ricardo Montalban?
Well, as a teenager living in Montreal, every couple of years we'd go down to New York City for a weekend to see some of the shows. And I saw a show where there was a guy dancing. Why would I remember a guy dancing in a girlie show? But I saw this guy dancing and he was a wonderful, wonderful dancer and a good-looking guy. Then I'd go to the movies and I'd see this same guy, and he was a Latin lover. Then I saw him become a villain and now he's the bad guy. So in my mind I kind of had a history with Ricardo. He was always in my head. I don't know why he made such an impact. I never liked the way I looked, and maybe I was looking for a guy who I wished I looked like. Then, one day, he comes on the set. If I remember, he was walking with a cane. He said he'd fallen off a horse. Whatever he had done, it never healed. And he got into a walker and then into a wheelchair. I got to really become a friend. I mean, imagine — *I* have enough trouble getting out of bed in the morning, but for a dancer becoming crippled... I never really discussed this with him. It must have been awful. I loved him.

What did you think about killing Spock? Did you see that as the masterstroke it was?
Erm, no [*laughs*]. Originally nobody told me anything. "Keep it from Shatner because he's likely to bleat it out in an interview!" Then I thought it was a crippling idea. I thought, "My God, [Leonard Nimoy] is leaving this fountain of art and commerce that is *Star Trek*. Why is he doing that? That's the silliest thing I've ever heard." I remember shooting it, him going over to DeForest [Kelley] and saying, "Remember," and nobody had told me. I thought, "What is he doing?" All these clues that I should have picked up on... And it *was* a masterstroke. Leonard and I had become by that time great friends, but he never told me about that plan. I just stupidly blundered on.

It was sad news about Nichelle Nichols' passing. What was your happiest memory of working with her?
Well, kissing her, of course. That was a very pleasant adventure. A beautiful lady and I get to kiss her. But also, in the early part, we flirted with each other, as two friends. And we would every so often sit down and talk about what she was doing, her son, what her ambitions were. In those early years I got to know her quite well. For a while there was a great flirtation going on that was great fun. But recently we lost track of each other. I would see her occasionally at a gathering of *Star Trek* people. She was an amazing, groundbreaking actress.

Let's finish with something you've maybe never been asked before: do you ever dream about *Star Trek*?
I don't know about a dream you wake up from. But *Star Trek*... Although I wasn't a youth, I was young, so it represents a youthful success to me. Not that I hadn't had success before. I had been on Broadway, I had been in films. I had even been in a previous television series. But *Star Trek* was a kind of apotheosis of youthful success. But also I was in the midst of an unhappy marriage, so it was positive and negative. I learned on *Star Trek* to keep a public face to avoid showing, or even living, the pain that I was feeling. Going to work and being 'the actor'. So it was quite a moment in my life, *Star Trek*. **ADAM SMITH**

STAR TREK: THE MOTION PICTURE AND *STAR TREK II: THE WRATH OF KHAN* ARE OUT NOW ON 4K BLU-RAY

Alamy, Allstar, Getty Images, Photofest

With friends like these...



The pair behind pitch-black Brit-com ALL MY FRIENDS HATE ME talk us through its cringe-inducing characters

IT'S THE STUFF of socially anxious nightmares: you're reunited with a bunch of old university pals on your birthday, and yet you can't shake the feeling that nobody wants you there. This is the horror through which Tom Stourton's Pete finds himself wading in razor-sharp comedy *All My Friends Hate Me*. Here, Stourton and co-writer Tom Palmer talk us through the film's enthralling, empathy-deficient ensemble.









PETE (TOM STOURTON)

We see the cast of characters through the lens of protagonist Pete's various anxieties — regarding his masculinity, his mental health, the value of his charity work, and guilt about his privilege. "Class definitely feels like a core part of Pete's inner anxiety," says Palmer. "He's asking himself, 'Am I a good guy who works with refugees, or a really obnoxious toff who used to hang out with some quite unsavoury people and did some bad things?'" This is Stourton's meatiest role yet, and one the actor says was "intimidating to take on," but he found it helpful to lean on the film's themes. "I didn't want to overthink whether he was going to be likeable or not," says Stourton. "Pete's M.O. is to try and be sympathetic, even to his detriment. He's desperately trying to be good, even though his motives are questionable."

HARRY (DUSTIN DEMRI-BURNS)

The primary proponent of Pete's paranoia is Harry, a stranger his friends bring back from the pub who he instantly finds unsettling. Dustin Demri-Burns is a remarkable presence, treading the line between total creep and life of the party with ease. "[Dustin] does have, in real life, a sort of roguish, dangerous energy to him," Stourton says. The most frustrating thing for Pete? That his friends seem to like this intruder more than him: "He blends in with these people a lot better than Pete does, whilst still remaining an outsider."

ARCHIE (GRAHAM DICKSON)

The most chaotic of the bunch is Archie, an über-posh party boy with a penchant for cocaine, terrible app ideas and sneaking up on people with a shotgun. "We've wanted to nail that character for a long time," Stourton says. "We needed someone to really remind [Pete] of things from his past he's ashamed of." Where Pete is painfully conscious of his privilege, Archie embraces it. The pair had some doubts about the character after seeing the film for the first time: "We shaved a few of his rough edges off," Palmer recalls. "And then we agreed that we'd committed to this offensive character because he gave us such good plot-points. It felt truthful and original."

SONIA (CHARLY CLIVE)

The sole balm for Pete during the film is his girlfriend Sonia, a Northern working-class lass he's been dreading introducing to his elite friends. Her arrival at the party, just as Pete is reaching his limit, is a crucial source of relief. "He needs to be thrown a sufficient lifeline," Stourton explains. "Something substantially good needs to happen to him, otherwise, as an audience, you're wondering why he doesn't just go home." Charly Clive brings an effervescent warmth to the role — and watch out for her *doozy* of a final line.



Left, top to bottom: Tom Stourton brushes up as Pete; Antonia Clarke as Claire; Charly Clive as Sonia; Sofa, so good for Harry (Dustin Demri-Burns), Fig (Georgina Campbell) and George (Joshua Maguire). **Above:** The 'friends' assemble, with a baseball-capped Archie (Graham Dickson), plus party-crasher Graham (Kieran Hodgson).

GEORGE (JOSH MCGUIRE)

Host George seems like Pete's one true friend — but undercuts every glimmer of kindness with scathing jabs and passive aggression. "He's the reason Pete stays," Palmer explains. "There was just enough of a bond there for Pete to be fixated by." A bond that is by no means unbreakable, according to Stourton: "Josh brought this understated quality that made George the group's anchor, but someone who also turned out to be a bastard."

CLAIRE (ANTONIA CLARKE)

Wispy wannabe artist Claire is Pete's ex, providing inherent tension — but her personal problems also allow the film to touch on more intense themes, and "to go to some slightly darker places," Stourton says. "Her fragility was a really good way of exacerbating Pete's guilt."

FIG (GEORGINA CAMPBELL)

George's wife Fig is the most blunt of them all, at one point pulling Pete aside and telling him outright that he's "been a bit crap". "It was one of the first scenes we wrote," Stourton recalls. "Talking about the central atmosphere of the film, we thought, 'That thing you're always hoping people aren't thinking — what if someone said that to him? How hard would it be to come back from that?" As *All My Friends Hate Me* proves, it would be *exceptionally* hard indeed.

SOPHIE BUTCHER

***ALL MY FRIENDS HATE ME* IS OUT NOW ON BLU-RAY, DVD AND BFI PLAYER**

MARK KERMODE'S MOVIE PLAYLIST

THE CRITIC AND SCALA RADIO PRESENTER CHOOSES SCORES HE'S BEEN PLAYING ON HIS WEEKLY SHOW



SHE WILL

BY CLINT MANSELL

If you were mesmerised by Charlotte Colbert's startlingly atmospheric feature debut, then you'll be equally haunted by Clint Mansell's fabulous soundtrack. Scala was delighted to give its listeners a pre-release taste of Mansell's music before the OST landed, and I predict that we'll still be playing cuts from it come Halloween. Featuring a heady mix of moody ambient themes and insistent choral elements, this has echoes of Michael Abels' brilliant work on Jordan Peele's *Us*, while still remaining unmistakeably Mansell. If you like this, check out Clint's score to Carol Morley's overlooked gem *Out Of Blue* — perhaps his finest work.

THE MAD MONKEY (EL MONO LOCO)

BY ANTOINE DUHAMEL

While we're on the subject of overlooked gems, playing a track from Antoine Duhamel's score for Jean-Luc Godard's *Pierrot Le Fou* sent me scuttling back to his soundtrack for this little-seen lost classic. Adapted from the French novel *Le Rêve Du Singe Fou* by Christopher Frank, *The Mad Monkey* stars Jeff Goldblum as an American screenwriter in Paris whose favourite book is *Peter Pan* — leading him into a web of intrigue when Lost Boy wunderkind Malcolm Greene (played by Dexter Fletcher) and his Tinker Bell-like sister Jenny (Liza Walker) snare him into writing a movie for them. The result is a bizarre psychosexual mystery (clumsily retitled *Twisted Obsession* in the US) whose neo-noir elements are highlighted by Duhamel's sublime score. Despite winning several Spanish Goya awards (including Best Film), *The Mad Monkey* tanked internationally and is rarely spoken of now. But Duhamel's music is out there, and I'd advise all film-music lovers to track it down.

CRIMES OF THE FUTURE

BY HOWARD SHORE

A new David Cronberg film is always a reason to be cheerful, not least because the director's go-to composer is Howard Shore. We've been playing selections from the latest Cronenberg/Shore collaboration, alongside classic cuts from films like *The Fly* and *Dead Ringers* which manage to engage and unsettle in equal measure, conjuring a unique fusion of heartbreak and horror.

THUMBELINA

BY VARIOUS ARTISTS

The nitwits behind the Razzies might have awarded a Worst Original Song gong to Don Bluth's 1994 animation, but I am indebted to the Scala listener who reunited me with a now-rare copy of the soundtrack album (with music by Barry Manilow) which I will be playing on hard rotation!

scala RADIO

MARK KERMODE'S FILM MUSIC SHOW, IN ASSOCIATION WITH *EMPIRE*, IS ON SCALA RADIO ON SATURDAYS FROM 1-3PM (SCALARADIO.CO.UK)



Gunning for trouble: Rocky Sullivan (James Cagney) with lawyer Jim Frazier (Humphrey Bogart).

THE MASTERPIECE

We reassess the greatest films of all time, one film at a time

Angels With Dirty Faces

WHEN JAMES CAGNEY was a dirt-poor kid growing up in inner-city New York, he would see a sharply dressed pimp called 'Smoke', standing on a Yorkville street corner.

Keeping one eye on his employees and the other out for the law, Smoke would hitch up his electric-blue suit, roll his shoulders, and greet passing friends with the words, "Whaddaya hear? Whaddaya say?"

When Cagney, now aged 38 and a major star at Warner Bros., set about reinventing the screen gangster with Rocky Sullivan in *Angels With Dirty Faces*, he appropriated the hitch, the shoulder-roll and the catchphrase. Rocky may have had a code of honour, a legitimate grievance with society, and a priest for a best pal, but he also had the manners and mannerisms of a street pimp.

Cagney's breakthrough had come in *The Public Enemy* (1931), in which he was cast as a sneering sadist, but by 1938 the gangster-film boom was over, defanged by a censorship clampdown that outlawed the glamourising of criminals. Rowland Brown's story for *Angels With Dirty Faces* circumvented that problem by fusing the crime picture with the social-message movie. In short: it was fine for Cagney to kidnap a lawyer, kill cops and execute his boss, if the audience realised in the end that gangsterism was bad.

What could have made for a confused or compromised film led instead to a masterpiece: a profoundly moving, fascinatingly ambivalent movie, and a testament to the enduring genius of James Cagney.

The film opens with a characteristic crane shot from future *Casablanca* director Michael Curtiz, that vividly pitches us into New York tenement life, the early 1920s. Two Irish-American boys, Rocky Sullivan and Jerry Connolly, are about to have their destinies determined. Chased by cops after ransacking a boxcar, Jerry will make it over the fence to freedom — and a life in the priesthood.

Rocky won't.

Fifteen years later, and fresh out of prison, 'Two Gun' Rocky (Cagney) returns to the neighbourhood to renew old acquaintances, while asking his crooked lawyer (Humphrey Bogart) if he can please have his hundred grand back. Revisiting childhood haunts, Rocky happens upon the next generation of street punks (the 'Dead End Kids'), and begins to battle Father Jerry (Pat O'Brien) for their souls.

At its heart, *Angels* is a love story between a career criminal and a priest. What may sound far-fetched on paper feels utterly real on celluloid, grounded in the immigrant communities who never quit their God despite being forced to live in squalor, and rooted in a remarkably spiritual understanding of loyalty and betrayal: that while society's impositions might force you to war with a friend, there is a deeper bond that can never be severed.

The film's rich emotional core is augmented by Curtiz's astounding visual sense. "I put all the







Above: Rocky makes his point. **Left:** A little basketball with those angels with dirty faces. **Below:** Cagney at the end of his career, in 1981 swansong *Ragtime*.

art into my pictures that I think the audience can stand," Curtiz once said, though that wasn't the whole story. As a memo from the Warner front office observed during production, "I think he would rather play cops and robbers than eat."

Springing from Curtiz's duality as artist and action specialist, the film contains perhaps the three most arresting images in gangster cinema. There's Rocky framed in a drinks-cabinet mirror, face contorted with malice, as he blasts a crime kingpin into the next life. There's the indelible shot of him tearstained and tuxedoed, pointing a gun at a priest's head. And there's the star walking into his final close-up, jaw grimly set, ready for 34 seconds of cinema that will spark 84 years of debate. When Rocky — bound for the electric chair — yells and screams and begs for his life, is he doing so out of genuine fear, or as a favour for his old pal the priest, so that the young tearaways who idolise him will see that their hero had feet of clay?

That's up to you. What's incontrovertible is that that final intervention — in which Cagney aims for the heavens and finds them — is a staggering piece of acting. But there are also smaller moments that showcase his genius, and those elements of it that are often overlooked. His energy, his comic timing, the fact he resembled an explosion in a charisma factory — that's all part of the legend. But his softness, subtlety and specificity? Not so much.

Beneath some amusing patter, the sequence where two cops come to Rocky's room in search of that hundred grand is essentially enacted entirely by Cagney's hands, from fingers lingering warily on a banister, and an emphatic jab of his thumb, to the hiding of the gun, the stashing of the cash, and his nonchalant leafing-through of a detective-stories magazine.

Alone with O'Brien, Cagney exhibits the beguiling gentleness that pockmarked his best roles. In their first scene, he turns the simple phrase "certainly did, certainly did" into a kind of nostalgic poetry, just by looking at the floor. Later, when the priest returns an unwanted donation, Cagney cycles through Rocky's defence mechanisms — denial, offhand humour, pragmatism, bravado — before landing affectingly on the truth.

It's the pair's chemistry that makes the premise work. Cagney was the most dynamic screen actor of his generation, while his friend and frequent co-star... wasn't. But O'Brien had one great performance in him, and here it is, blessed with an escalating sincerity and stillness. With Cagney opposite, he can sidestep sanctimony, feeding off his sparring partner's instinctive irreverence and latent compassion.

Each of Cagney's gangsters was a discrete creation, and his masterstroke here is refusing to make Rocky merely a tough guy with a heart of gold, or a steel centre smothered in charm. Instead, he's an unwitting social experiment, largely good but deeply dangerous, in whom tenderness and thuggishness are increasingly vying for control. Often the effect on the viewer amounts to, "Well, this guy's fucking cool" — an eventuality that the censorship office appears to have overlooked — but the moment when Rocky morphs from an avuncular uncle-figure to an underworld heavy in front of teen hoodlum Bim (Leo Gorcey) is fantastically ugly.

In 1949, with *White Heat*, Cagney would reimagine the gangster once more, this time as a Freudian nightmare. But here it was still the New Deal-era, and the path to the death house — or the priesthood — was seen as just a matter of chance.

In real life it had seemed the same. As Rocky walked his last mile, Cagney wasn't thinking of Smoke, the pimp who'd inspired the characterisation, but of another figure from his youth: Peter 'Bootah' Hessling. Cagney had gone to Broadway, then onto Hollywood; his childhood friend had gone to the chair. **RICK BURIN**

ANGELS WITH DIRTY FACES **IS OUT NOW ON DVD, BLU-RAY AND DIGITAL**

CAGNEY IN NUMBERS

THE 101 ON FILM'S GANGSTER NO. 1



17/7/1899

BORN JAMES FRANCIS CAGNEY JR IN NEW YORK

5' 4"
HIS HEIGHT

0 Number of times he actually said "You dirty rat!"

9 Number of films in which he co-starred with **Pat O'Brien** (*Here Comes The Navy*, *Devil Dogs Of The Air*, *The Irish In Us*, *Ceiling Zero*, *Boy Meets Girl*, *The Fighting 69th*, *Torrid Zone*, *Ragtime* and, of course, *Angels With Dirty Faces*)

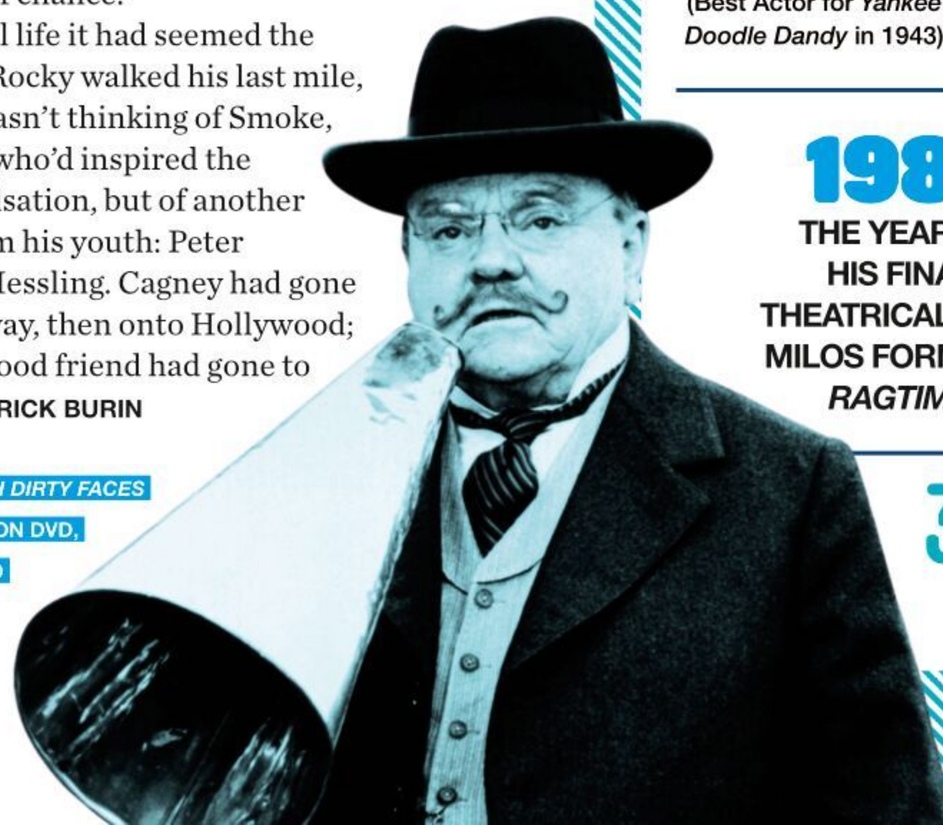
3
NUMBER OF OSCARS HE WAS NOMINATED FOR

1
NUMBER OF OSCARS HE WON
(Best Actor for *Yankee Doodle Dandy* in 1943)

6504
The location of his star on Hollywood Boulevard, on the Hollywood Walk Of Fame

1981
THE YEAR OF HIS FINAL THEATRICAL FILM, MILOS FORMAN'S *RAGTIME*

20
The number of years he was retired from the film industry, from 1961 on



30/3/1986
DIED, AGED 86

Alamy, Getty Images



THE RANKING

Four *Empire* writers. One super-producer. Tons of films. Ordered definitively.

The films of Jerry Bruckheimer

Chris: There are some producers who are super-producers, who have become brands in their own right. I'm thinking of people like Joel Silver and Jerry Bruckheimer. By and large, you know what you're going to get when you see the words "Jerry Bruckheimer" on a movie.

Nick: It's the high-concept thing, isn't it? He and Don Simpson created the high-concept blockbuster in the '80s and changed Hollywood.

Chris: There will be some who see him as one of the key players in the rise of blockbusters and the dumbing down of cinema, but when I see a Jerry Bruckheimer film, I know I'm going to get some decent production values, some orange filters — especially if Tony Scott was director — some interesting comedy, some crazy action.

Helen: And you're also getting romance, which doesn't get talked about enough. If you look back at his early career, there's a lot of films that are appealing to women, not just men.

Nick: The core of the whole high-concept thing is that he makes movies that can be boiled down to a single sentence, or even just one image, like *Flashdance*. That's the image. That's all you need. *The Rock* is about two guys breaking into Alcatraz. *G-Force* is talking guinea pigs. High concept.

Amon: He has a knack for identifying talent super-early. I'm thinking of Eddie Murphy in *Beverly Hills Cop*, and we have him to thank for making Nicolas Cage an action star with *The Rock*.

Chris: There are several stages to Bruckheimer's career. Before he and Simpson got that blockbuster boulder rolling, he made some really interesting films like *American Gigolo* and Michael Mann's *Thief*.

Helen: More stylish, in a different way, and slower than we associate with Jerry Bruckheimer.

Chris: He and Simpson love a director with a great eye. Michael Mann has a great eye. Tony Scott had an amazing eye.

Nick: For a cop film, *Beverly Hills Cop* is glossy. The movies are all slick. He doesn't make ordinary-looking films.

Chris: *Flashdance* and *Top Gun* were at the vanguard of the MTV-ification of Hollywood in the 1980s. Lots of flashy visuals, great rock music, sexy, cool leads, not a lot of substance.

Helen: I think Bruckheimer and

OUR CRITICS



NICK DE SEMLYEN
Dislikes all the *Pirates* films. Even the one with the boats and all the rum.



CHRIS HEWITT
Felt the need… the need for *Speed*. Then realised Jerry Bruckheimer didn't make it.



HELEN O'HARA
Won't be writing a deep dive on *Crimson Tide* any time soon.



AMON WARMANN
Is a bad boy, but for not life. Although he loves *Bad Boys For Life*. Confusing.



Simpson hit upon that formula. *Beverly Hills Cop* is slightly different to the others, but he really leaned into the power of MTV and the power of radio to sell his movies. I also quite like the nonsense of some of them. *Flashdance* could not make less sense. It really couldn't.

Nick: He's the producer who brought us Cole Trickle, which sounds like something you need to get medication for. That was in *Days Of Thunder*, which was *Top Gun* on land.

Chris: Let's talk *Top Gun*. When we did the Tom Cruise Ranking, it wasn't that high up on the list. Is it the same here? Does the sequel far surpass the original?

Amon: For me, *Top Gun: Maverick* surpasses the original.

Helen: *Top Gun* is every bit as ludicrous as *Flashdance*, but it's a hell of a lot of fun. It's a classic for a reason. It's a touchstone of the era. It's none more '80s.

Nick: *Top Gun* was a seminal movie for me. At school, we used to take turns sitting in a chair while other kids would move the chair around and pretend we were flying. It's an iconic film, but maybe without being a *good* film.

Helen: I thought this list was going to be difficult to compile. But then I started going through his work and apart from *Maverick*, you could ignore most of the last 15 years.

Nick: The films get more and more bloated and bigger and more expensive and, frankly, not as good. That's why I was so pleasantly surprised with *Top Gun: Maverick*, because it's so brisk and efficient and hasn't got any of the bloat of those dreadful *Pirates Of The Caribbean* films.

Amon: The first one is lightning in a bottle. Johnny Depp's performance is great. It's one of the best character introductions of any film. I still get a kick out of watching that original film.

Nick: They somehow managed to make a Kraken boring, which I didn't think was possible.

Chris: No, this Kraken is really more-ish.

Nick: They're very smug blockbusters. They don't have the propulsion a good blockbuster should have. They're slow and meandering.

Chris: Those movies represent the second reinvention of Bruckheimer: family films. The first was with the action movies of the '90s.

Nick: It's the '90s blockbusters that are peak Bruckheimer. Peakheimer. I could yammer on about *Crimson Tide*. What's the high concept for that film? It's people trapped in a submarine with a very angry Gene Hackman.

Helen: That's not on my list, I'll be honest. I'm a *Hunt For Red October* girl and I don't feel the need for *Crimson Tide*.

Amon: It has the GOAT in it.

Chris: Amon, don't be ridiculous. You can't get a goat on a submarine.

Helen: I don't love the Tarantino additions. They stick out like a sore thumb to me. I don't buy Denzel Washington talking about Silver Surfer. Even he can't sell that one to me.

Nick: I don't buy anything in *The Rock*. I don't buy a man called Stanley Goodspeed, but I love it. I love everything in *Crimson Tide*.

Chris: It's fucking great. I'd say it's the best film Bruckheimer made with Tony Scott.

Amon: One of my favourite things to watch on screen is good leadership and there's so much of it in that film.

Nick: Hackman is majestic in that film. He's just terrifying. He's the grumpiest man you've ever seen in your life.

Chris: And he's so good in *Enemy Of The State*. It's the film *The Conversation* could have been. In fact, I'd say it's the best film that Bruckheimer made with Tony Scott.

Helen: Whoa, déjà vu, man.

Chris: I'd say *Déjà Vu* is the best film Jerry Bruckheimer made with Tony Scott.

Nick: With *The Rock*, that could have been a disaster but the chemistry between Cage and Connery works brilliantly.

Helen: The shower scene is one of my favourite all-time macho action scenes.

Nick: It's that fusion of action and comedy. *Con Air* has that as well. They're deeply silly films, but they've got their tongue in their cheek. That started with *Beverly Hills Cop*.

Chris: I think the comedy is more organic in that movie. The action scenes are played straight. It's an actual cop movie, with the structure of a cop thriller, and they let Eddie do his thing. And that's what they did with *Bad Boys* and *Bad Boys II*.

Nick: We haven't talked about *Armageddon*. Did anyone put it on their list?

Amon: I wanted to put the *Armageddon* DVD commentary on my list.

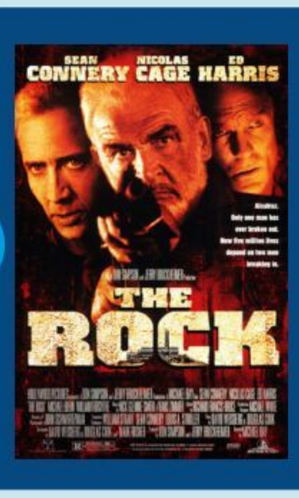
Chris: I really like it. It's ultra-cheesy and gets me at the end with, "Requesting permission to shake the hand of the daughter of the bravest man I've ever met," which is both the worst line ever written and the best line ever delivered.

Helen: I enjoy *Armageddon*. But as a comedy.

Chris: Alright, enough squabbling. Let's vote!

Illustration: Jacey

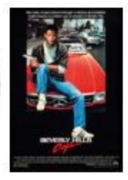
THE TOP TEN



1 THE ROCK (1996)
Helen: "With chewy, tough-guy dialogue, a charismatic cast and huge action scenes, this is Bay and Bruckheimer at their bombastic best. Should be the template for pretty much every Bruckheimer film."



2 TOP GUN: MAVERICK (2022)
Chris: "Bruckheimer's biggest hit, as Tom Cruise returns to the cockpit and, for me, soars past the original."



3 BEVERLY HILLS COP (1984)
Nick: "With this fizzy tale of a lawman shaking up Hollywood, Bruckheimer inspired countless imitators."



4 CRIMSON TIDE (1995)
Nick: "A story about two men yelling in a big, metal tube shouldn't be this fun. Suspenseful, sweaty, superlative."



5 CON AIR (1997)
Amon: "Completely preposterous, yet undeniably entertaining. But I'm glad it didn't spark a mullet revival."



6 PIRATES OF THE CARIBBEAN: THE CURSE OF THE BLACK PEARL (2003)
Amon: "Turned a theme-park ride into a swashbuckling joy and epic franchise."



7 ENEMY OF THE STATE (1998)
Chris: "A cracking, Tony Scott-directed thriller that makes great use of its mismatched buddy duo."



8 THIEF (1981)
Nick: "A Jerry curio — a character study with zero exploding planes — yet with all his trademark gloss."



9 ARMAGEDDON (1998)
Chris: "The meteor movie that still makes a deep impact, despite more cheese than a branch of Pizza Hut."



10 TOP GUN (1986)
Helen: "A jet-fuelled joyride with action scenes like we'd never seen before and starmaking turns."

AGREE? DISAGREE? WRITE IN AND TELL US AT:
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! SPOILER WARNING

THE VIEWING GUIDE

A deep dive into the must-see moments from the month's big release



Doctor Strange In The Multiverse Of Madness

DEMONIC POSSESSIONS. DEADLY dark-magic books. Decapitated telepaths. This is what you get when you task a legendary horror filmmaker with directing a scare-packed *Doctor Strange* sequel. The long-awaited return of Sam Raimi, aka the Master Of The Sadistic Arts, sent him spiralling into the *Multiverse Of Madness* — taking on a Marvel Cinematic Universe movie decades after changing the comic-book blockbuster forever with his Spider-Man films. The result is a spooky, kooky, surprise-filled romp with gnarly kills, playful twists, and acts of good old-fashioned heroism. Here, writer Michael Waldron breaks down the secrets of Strange's second solo outing.

THE COLDEST OPEN

Bam! We begin in media res, with a long-haired variant of Doctor Strange (Benedict Cumberbatch) and multiverse-hopping teen America Chavez (Xochitl Gomez) fleeing a rampaging demon — until Strange turns on the girl, tries to steal her powers, nearly kills her in the process, and ends up dead meat. Oof. "There were versions where he was a little more of a straight-up heroic friend to her, but that didn't feel as compelling — we weren't contrasting him enough with our Strange," says Waldron. "Are they all the same, or is it possible that at least one of them could make a different choice in a similar situation?" Stay tuned...

BAD APPLES

Hoping to help America, Strange visits Wanda Maximoff (Elizabeth Olsen) at her orchard. Except, she's swiftly revealed as the film's villain and the being who was gunning for America all along. She's gone full Scarlet Witch, succumbing to the evil magic of spell-book the Darkhold, trying to find her kids out there in the multiverse. "It's a fun penny-drop moment," laughs Waldron. "For our team, it was a constant asking of, 'Have we seen enough of Wanda in *WandaVision* — with her taking the Darkhold, with that credits tag — to believe where we're going?' And we felt, absolutely we have — this is where the Darkhold would have led her, to an escalation of what she was doing in *WandaVision*."

MEET THE ILLUMINATI

On the alternate-universe Earth-838, Strange and America are captured by the Illuminati — an Avengers-like supergroup with a fascistic edge, comprising major comic-book cameos. Patrick Stewart returns as *X-Men*'s Professor X, Hayley Atwell is a super-soldier-serumed Captain Carter, Lashana Lynch's Maria Rambeau is an alternative Captain Marvel, Anson Mount reprises *Inhumans*' Black Bolt — and, most surprisingly, John Krasinski

Capital Pictures. Disney



















appears as the Fantastic Four's Reed Richards, a role the internet had long fan-cast him in. "That's the big one, right?" Waldron chuckles. "I always wanted Reed Richards in this thing. In my very first draft, I wrote a tag just for the hell of it, of the events of the movie being recorded and reviewed by somebody in the Baxter Building, and a stretchy hand coming into frame to run it back. Reed is probably my favourite Marvel comics character, so I was always gunning to get him in here somewhere." And here he is, in the MCU at last — until...

MEAT, FORMERLY KNOWN AS THE ILLUMINATI

Immediately after introducing the Illuminati, the movie unleashes a pissed-off Wanda on them — brutally murdering the team one-by-one. "I was at a point in the script where I was like, 'Shit, I don't know what to do,'" Waldron recalls. "The movie needs to get *drunk*." First to die is the hypersonically voiced Black Bolt, whose head explodes when Wanda takes his mouth away. "We wanted the first death to feel really horrific: 'Listen, don't fuck with Wanda.' We were sitting on Zoom discussing how we kill Black Bolt, and somebody said his power is shooting ultra-powerful energy from his mouth. And I swear to God, without missing a beat, Sam goes, 'What mouth?' And Sam just painted the scene for us, '... and then you just cut to him, Wanda's just ripped his mouth closed, and he screams, and his head explodes.' That's master of horror Sam Raimi for you."

THE WALKING DEAD

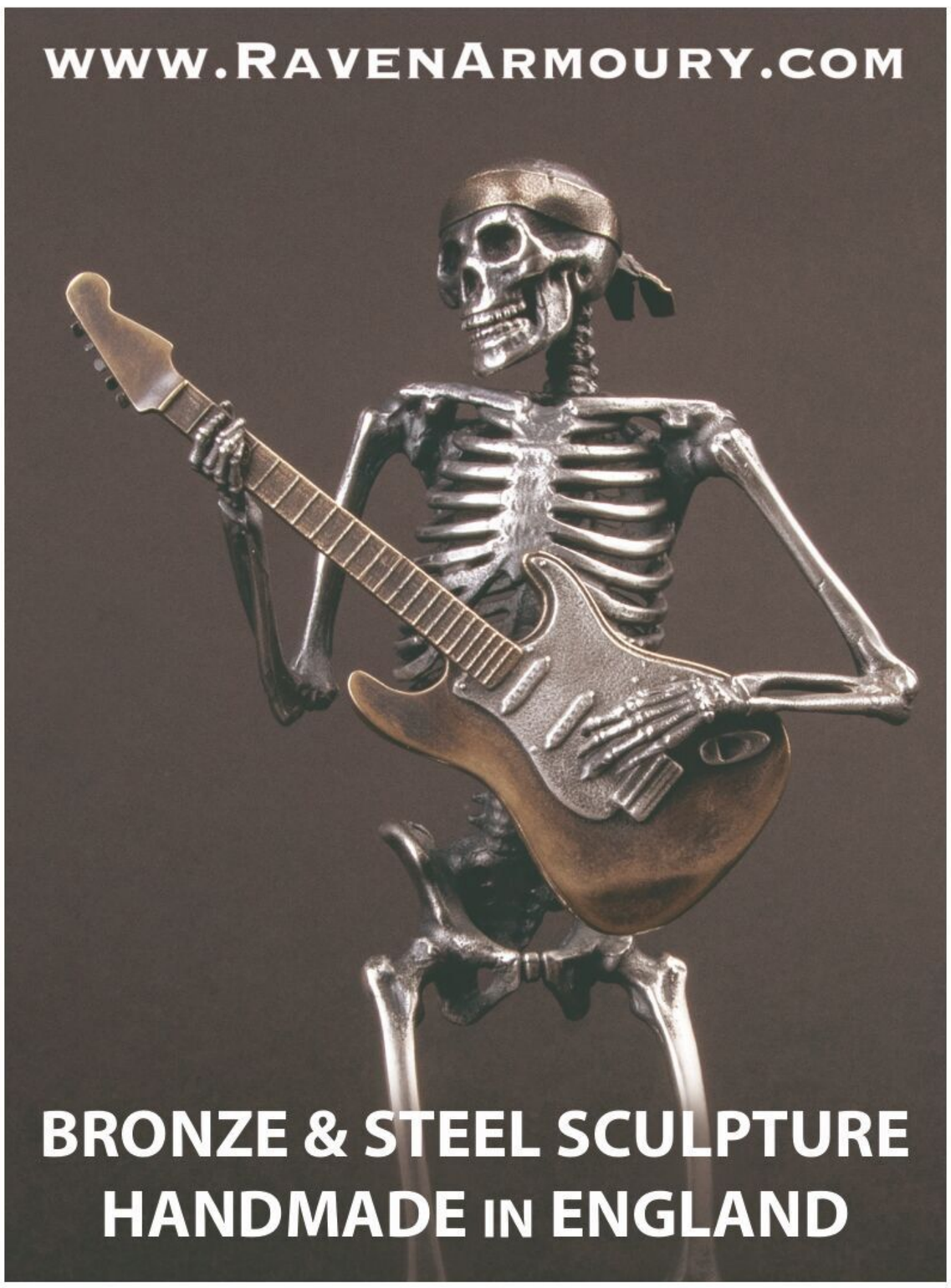
The end begins with Doctor Strange possessing his own dead body in another universe to fight back against Wanda. "It was the biggest eureka moment of the film," Waldron reveals — but initially the director wasn't so sure. "Sam's initial reaction was caution, because he wasn't there to just play the hits. Sam only cares about a Zombie Strange if it's the right thing for Doctor Strange, not just because it's cool if you're a fan of *Evil Dead*." Raimi's imagination was quickly sparked, though. "Sam's like, 'Alright, but if he's going to do that, the souls of the damned should come after him,' and suddenly Sam's the ten-year-old in the room. That whole cloak-of-souls thing came from Sam being like, 'You think you guys got some crazy shit?' He elevated it even more with those demons."

DING-DONG! THE WITCH IS DEAD?

Instead of taking America's powers to defeat Wanda, our Doctor Strange makes a different choice, trusting the girl to take on Wanda herself. Forcing her to see the monster she's become, America snaps Wanda out of her trance. Wanda destroys the Darkhold across every multiversal reality, and brings down Mount Wundagore — trapping herself under the rubble. "Wanda makes a sacrifice to protect every other Wanda, and anybody who might be tempted in the same way she was," says Waldron. But is the Scarlet Witch truly dead and buried? "She's removing herself from the board... For now? Forever? We'll see. I'd like to see her again..." If only we knew a master of the mystic arts with that kind of power. **BEN TRAVIS**

DOCTOR STRANGE IN THE MULTIVERSE OF MADNESS **IS OUT NOW ON DVD, BLU-RAY, 4K, DIGITAL AND DISNEY+**

movie marketplace



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THE CULT OF KIM NEWMAN

The critic and novelist selects the month's weirdest home-ent releases



SET IN a Chicago peepshow in neon-lit, hard-rock-scored 1987, Luke Boyce's Revealer confines its odd couple to a grimy booth and an underground maze during an apocalypse. Angie (Caito Aase) runs a gauntlet of protestors to clock on as an exotic dancer in the 'Revealers' club. When something — if not Angie's bump-and-grind act, then a general air of '80s depravity — brings about the Biblical End Times, Christian anti-porn campaigner Sally (Shaina Schrooten) joins Angie in peril. They bicker and bond as the trumpet of doom sounds, the unrighteous are cut down and demons and angels clash. With most of the Tribulation off screen, Boyce focuses on the complex, antagonistic women, whose secrets compromise their 'sinner' and 'saved' stereotypes.

Another two-character piece set in an insalubrious confined space (a roadside toilet) is Rebekah McKendry's wickedly witty Glorious. It similarly limits the action to a single set while world- and even universe-changing (or -ending) events take place outside. Loser Wes (Ryan Kwanten), living out of his car after a break-up, nips into the rest room for a pee and a wash and maybe a place to crash. He is engaged in conversation by an unseen presence in the next stall (voiced perfectly by J.K. Simmons) who claims to be a god and needs certain parts of Wes' anatomy stuck through a hole in the partition to prevent the devastation of all reality. Kwanten gives a virtuoso study in put-upon cluelessness and Simmons puts as much into a voice-over as many would an on-screen performance. Funny, scary and mind-expanding.

Mattie Do's The Long Walk is (mostly) set in a cyberpunk future, but in a Laotian rural area where few high-tech gadgets (credit chips implanted in forearms) have caught on and everything else is as it always has been. An old man (Yannawoutthi Chanthalungsy) who can communicate with ghosts is accompanied almost everywhere by a long-dead girl (Noutnapha Soydara) who can walk him back to his childhood, where he tries to change the future for his younger self (Por Silatsa). That sort of meddling seldom has a happy outcome. Much tension comes from the possibility that the protagonist has rewritten his timeline so much that he's rebooted himself as a serial killer — making rather than helping ghosts — though it's ambiguous enough to hint at the sadist nestled inside the saint from the outset. Unlike more whizz-bang multiverses on offer, its contemplative approach builds quietly to an affecting pay-off.

Similarly titled and also requiring close attention, Yoon Jae-geun's Spiritwalker is an action-oriented trip through one man's multiverse. Kang (Yoon Kye-sang) wakes up at the site of a car crash, injured and amnesiac. As in *Quantum Leap*, he's not the person he visibly appears to be. In the aftermath of a messy deal/bust-gone-wrong, Kang possesses a new body every 12 hours, serially inhabiting the lives of the group of violent men involved in the situation. He doesn't know whether his real self is a gangster or a cop, and those distinctions aren't too clear even when the facts are known. Unsure whether he's a betrayer or a saviour, Kang fixes his focus on ensuring the safety of a woman (Lim Ji-yeon) also caught up in this run-and-shoot-and-crash clusterhump. Full of stuntwork and general Korean cool, this makes the most of its *Memento*-like premise.

CULT HERO OF THE MONTH

JONATHAN DEMME

In 1973, Jonathan Demme was fired from directing a British sex comedy, *Secrets Of A Door-To-Door Salesman*; in 1992, he won the Best Director Oscar for *The Silence Of The Lambs*. From being not good (or bad) enough) to handle a rip-off of the despised *Confessions* series to making the only film (so far) to sweep both the Oscars and Fangoria's Chainsaw Awards is a huge leap. Two of Demme's early films for drive-in/grindhouse king Roger Corman are just out on Blu-ray and show how lively an off-the-radar talent he was before he went mainstream — *Caged Heat* (1974), a women-in-prison picture, and *Crazy Mama* (1975), a nostalgia gangster/road movie, have diva turns from Barbara Steele as a prison warden and Cloris Leachman as a bank bandit. They are full of crude energy, eccentric characters, subversive wit, car crashes and shoot-outs, and sympathy for the sexual outlaw.

Illustration: Neil Edwards. Getty Images

That'll do, pig

BONG JOON-HO on why his Criterion-approved giant-hog movie deserves a second look

BEFORE *PARASITE*, THERE was a pig. Two years before Bong Joon-ho became an unlikely household name with *Parasite*'s unprecedented commercial, critical and Academy-Award-winning success, the Korean filmmaker made one of the most idiosyncratic films of his career with *Okja*. Given it's a CV which has also included an apocalyptic future-train (*Snowpiercer*) and a sea-monster that kidnaps children (*The Host*), that's pretty darn idiosyncratic. Released on Netflix in 2017, Bong's sixth film was a fable-ish tale of a 13-year-old girl named Mija (Ahn Seo-hyun) and her ride-or-die best friend named Okja, a giant, genetically modified super-pig. It is a strange, funny, exciting, profound cinematic experience — and like many films in Netflix's vast catalogue, may not have enjoyed the whole hog of exposure at the time.

Now, that humble porker is finally being given another shot at stardom, earning a prestigious release with the Criterion Collection. "It is only when I see the Blu-ray or DVD on the bookshelf in my house that I feel like the film is finally complete," says Director Bong, "and now that *Okja* is coming out onto a 4K Blu-ray I feel like the film is finally complete." It's the closing of a long and especially personal loop for the director, who was directly involved in the release, and who still holds the film's themes of animal rights and respect for the natural world close to his heart. Speaking about the film for the first time in years, Bong makes his case here for why *Okja* deserves a re-evaluation. Yes, there's much more to this film than meets the sty.

IT BOASTS A CG PIG YOU'LL FALL IN LOVE WITH

The star of the show, of course, is the titular Okja: an eight-foot-tall, laboratory-invented super-animal, seemingly blending the chunky proportions of a hippo, the loyalty and temperament of a hyper-trained pet dog, and the keen intelligence of a well-fed swine. With doleful eyes and a significant appetite, Okja is, to use the current parlance, hella thicc. But making a character rendered entirely in CGI feel likeable — and even lovable — was another challenge entirely.

"I did feel a lot of pressure," Bong admits. "With *The Host*, I had worked on a VFX creature. But the monster in *The Host* was literally a monster — the villain of the film. Okja is the main character, along with Mija. That was quite frightening. It was a challenge I was glad to take on, though." To bring the pig to life, Bong surrounded himself with Hollywood talent, hiring Oscar-winning VFX supervisor Erik-Jan de Boer to oversee the character. "He created the tiger in *Life Of Pi*," Bong notes. "We took a very realistic approach. I really wanted a creature that even animal scientists would be convinced of."

IT PROVIDES POOP-AS-PATHOS

That realism extended to every part of the super-pig's anatomy: in one key chase scene through the streets of Seoul, Okja saves the day by heroically shitting all over a baddie. (As one character points out, it's an "eco-friendly" weapon.) The film is full of these joyously scatological moments, but Bong takes a matter-of-fact approach to them. "I didn't intend the pooping and farting to serve as comedic elements," he says. "I just thought of them as an extension of our realistic approach. These are just very natural things that animals do." By leaning into the poops-and-all of the character, Bong hoped it would help us fall in love with the beast. "If the audience just perceived this creature as a VFX character, then we wouldn't really sympathise with the journey the character goes through, without that sense of reality." This is a film, then, where even faeces can be an emotional storytelling device.





Below left: BFFs Mija (Ahn Seo-hyun) and Okja the giant pig having fun on their adventures.

IT CONTAINS JAKE GYLLENHAAL'S MOST OUT-THERE PERFORMANCE

If you thought Jake Gyllenhaal was outlandish as a Spider-Man villain, *Okja* would like you to hold its beer. "With Jake, I remember we talked a lot about his gestures and his voice tone," recalls Bong, of Gyllenhaal's "disturbed zoologist" Johnny Wilcox, a character that's part Steve Irwin, part Timmy Mallett. "Specifically, if you look at a guitar, there's that section

where all the strings are wound up and tightened — not the part where you get the notes. If you grind that part with your fingernail, it makes this really high-pitched, squeaky sound. We talked about how his voice would sound like that." The result is a bizarre, screeching, deliberate caricature of a villain, highly strung in more ways than one. "He's quite an anxious character," says Bong. "He feels the need to constantly be entertaining. He may have been an animal lover originally, but he's become someone who abuses animals. He's this ball of contradictions."

IT HAS TWICE AS MUCH TILDA

Tilda Swinton stars as both the eccentric, brace-wearing evil CEO Lucy Mirando (the meat-industry titan who orders Okja's creation) *and* her identical twin sister, Nancy. It was an idea that Bong had "from the screenwriting stage," he says. "This is getting quite conceptual, but I thought Nancy and Lucy represented the two faces of mass capitalism: on the outside, they may seem different, but in essence, they are exactly the same." While Nancy is menacing and intimidating, Lucy is racked with inferiority and insecurity. "Tilda really enjoys going through transformations — I think that's where the idea for [Lucy's] braces came up."

IT'S A PERSONAL PAEAN TO VEGETARIANISM

Despite its Spielbergian adventuring and madcap tone, *Okja* is really a sad and angry commentary on where your favourite burgers come from, with a brutal final act set in a knacker's yard. "This story is a critique on the food industry," says Bong. "Those who anticipated a fairy-tale-like journey might have been quite surprised by the final act, and think of it as too brutal. But I wanted to show the reality of the situation. We literally show the inside of a slaughterhouse." It's a savage way to end things, and one that almost prevented the film from being made ("A lot of studios rejected our project," Bong notes), but it was important to the filmmaker. The Animal Liberation Front activists, played in the film by Paul Dano and Steven Yeun, were effectively his proxies. "Essentially, fundamentally, I believe that they are right," Bong says. More so than perhaps any of his other films, *Okja* is personal to Bong: a plea to be kinder to our animals, our fellow humans, and our world.

JOHN NUGENT

***OKJA* IS OUT NOW ON CRITERION COLLECTION BLU-RAY**





Left: Jake Gyllenhaal pulls out all the stops as screeching villain Johnny Wilcox. **Below:** Director Bong Joon-ho on set with Tilda Swinton, who plays identical twins in the film.

Illustration: Russell Moorcroft

THE STORY OF THE SHOT

How iconic images came to life

Lawrence Of Arabia

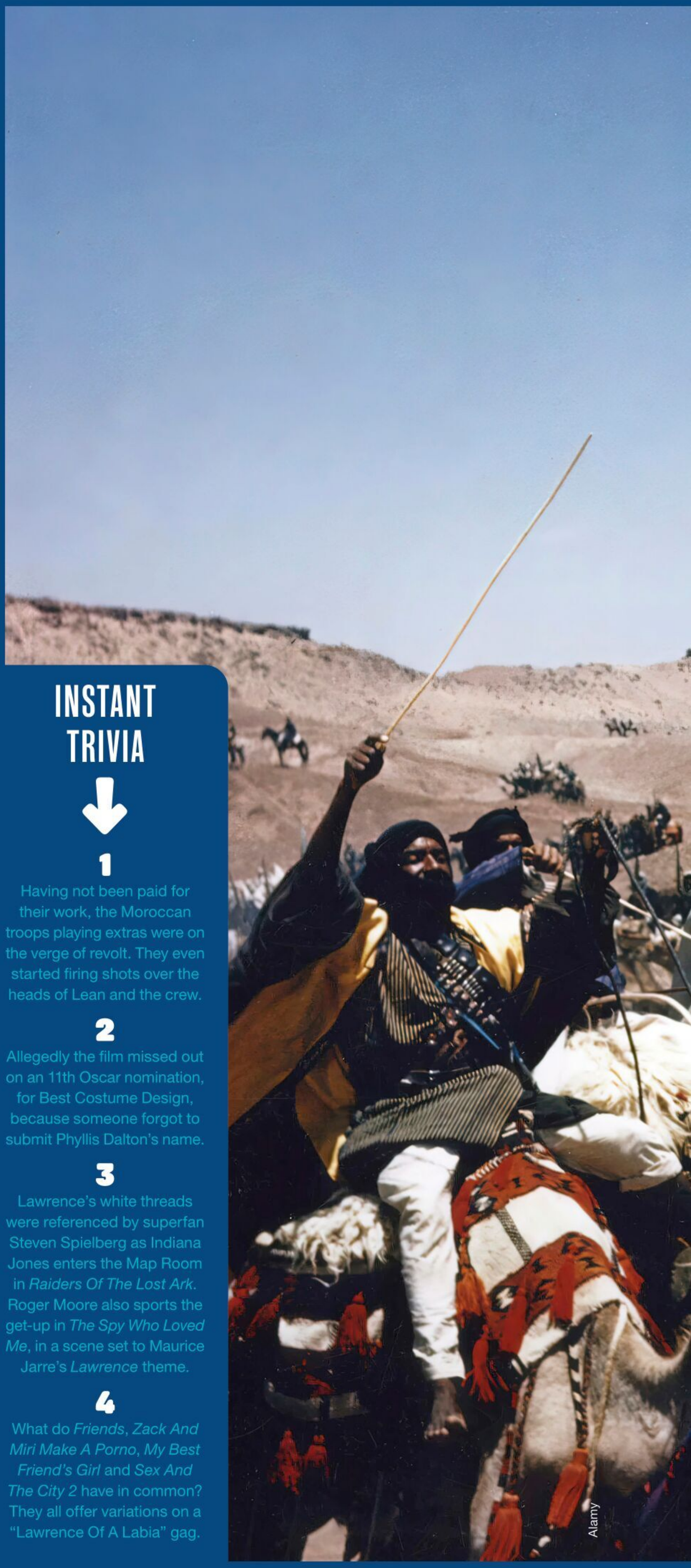
DAVID LEAN HAD a very simple attraction to the complex hero of *Lawrence Of Arabia*. "This Oxford don on camelback," he once said. "I mean, it was absolutely nutty." Receiving every honour under the baking sun — from seven Oscars at the time to a place on the Library Of Congress National Film Registry List in 1991 — Lean's masterpiece charts the exploits of T.E. Lawrence (Peter O'Toole) in assisting Prince Faisal (Alec Guinness) in the Arab revolt against the Turks during World War I. Playing up to Lawrence's swelling ego, unscrupulous General Allenby (Jack Hawkins) convinces the soldier-scholar to take Damascus for the Arabs. Lawrence agrees but, now seeing himself as a kind of demi-god saviour, assembles a ragtag band of rough sorts (who care little for the cause) to join the assault. Lawrence leading the charge shouting, "Damascus!" sums up Lean's film: political, personal, epic, intimate, iconic.

The scene cleaves closely to Lawrence's description in his autobiography *Seven Pillars Of Wisdom*: "Fellows were very proud of being in my bodyguard... They dressed like a bed of tulips, in every colour but white; for that was my constant wear." Created by costume designer Phyllis Dalton, Lawrence's legendary robes played into the character's arc. As the film goes on, the material gets thinner and thinner, ending up muslin. By the end, as Lean puts it, Lawrence "looked almost ghost-like because the clothes he was wearing were the exact copies of the rich silk he wore at the beginning but they were almost transparent. It gave a kind of faded look that worked a treat. Nobody ever spots it."

The scene started shooting on 18 July 1962 on the mudflats at Ouarzazate, Morocco, some nine hours from Casablanca. Lean described it as "a terrible place south of the Atlas Mountains where the French Foreign Legion send their men for punishment". Actor Anthony Quinn went further, dubbing it "the arsehole of the world." Peter O'Toole started learning to camel-ride some three months before filming started but found it "impossible... What you see is a European perched uneasily on the top of this huge brute... After a while my bottom was bleeding from bouncing up and down on this snorting great dragon."

Developing a nasty cyst on his backside, O'Toole came up with an ingenious solution. While in Beirut gambling with Omar Sharif, the actor came across Dunlopillo foam-rubber pads — "mucous-membrane pink", he recalled — and placed them under the saddle. This literal safety cushion was soon coveted by the Bedouin, O'Toole then "requisitioning tons of this damn stuff, yards of it. I think I introduced sponge rubber into Arabian culture... They called me [in Arabic] 'the father of rubber'." Better latex than never. **IAN FREER**

***LAWRENCE OF ARABIA* IS OUT NOW ON DVD, BLU-RAY AND DIGITAL**



INSTANT TRIVIA

1

Having not been paid for their work, the Moroccan troops playing extras were on the verge of revolt. They even started firing shots over the heads of Lean and the crew.

2

Allegedly the film missed out on an 11th Oscar nomination, for Best Costume Design, because someone forgot to submit Phyllis Dalton's name.

3

Lawrence's white threads were referenced by superfan Steven Spielberg as Indiana Jones enters the Map Room in *Raiders Of The Lost Ark*. Roger Moore also sports the get-up in *The Spy Who Loved Me*, in a scene set to Maurice Jarre's *Lawrence* theme.

4

What do *Friends*, *Zack And Miri Make A Porno*, *My Best Friend's Girl* and *Sex And The City 2* have in common? They all offer variations on a "Lawrence Of A Labia" gag.

Alamy



Damascus! Peter O'Toole as T.E. Lawrence leads the charge into film history.

6 OF THE BEST

Team *Empire* on the month's essential movies and TV

PICK OF THE MONTH



ELVIS

OUT **19 SEPTEMBER** / CERT **TBC** / **159 MINS**

DVD BR 4K

Other than John Carpenter's 1979 TV movie, which introduced him to Kurt Russell, Elvis Presley biopics have been markedly thin on the ground. Thankfully, Baz Luhrmann has rectified that with this thrilling, pulsating whizz through Presley's life, as seen through the eyes of his conniving manager, Colonel Tom Parker (Tom Hanks, cackling like a panto villain). Yes, Luhrmann has made his film again — a feverish intro overloads the audience before slowing down to find the emotional centre — but when it's this good, when the music is presented so vitally, and when it's anchored by a starmaking turn by Austin Butler that deserves to be remembered come Oscar-nominations time, who's complaining? **CHRIS HEWITT**



MEN

OUT **NOW** / CERT **15** / **100 MINS**

DVD BR

Alex Garland follows the hat-trick of *Ex Machina*, *Annihilation* and *Devs* with a Lynchian cheese-dream of a horror film that employs subtext as text to explore the psyche of a tormented woman. Reeling from the violent death of her husband (Paapa Essiedu), Harper (Jessie Buckley) rents a country cottage for a recuperative getaway, only to find there's no getting away from her trauma. That's because the village men (all played by Rory Kinnear) chip away at her with negging, gaslighting, microaggressions and worse as her anguished mind tries to process a toxic cocktail of grief and guilt. The result is a flawed but fascinating film that works both as a horror movie and a bold narrative experiment. **DAVID HUGHES**



STAR TREK II: THE WRATH OF KHAN

OUT **5 SEPTEMBER** / CERT **12** / **113 MINS**

4K

It's ironic that *Wrath Of Khan*'s MacGuffin is a gizmo designed to revive dead worlds. After all, the debacle of *The Motion Picture* had left the *Trek* franchise itself in need of urgent resuscitation. Rescue came in the form of director Nicholas Meyer and screenwriter Harve Bennett, who ditched the cod-philosophical stylings of *Motion Picture* and craftily mined the original series, foregrounding the easy camaraderie of the Enterprise's crew, reviving a classic villain in Ricardo Montalban's Khan and chucking in a thrilling James Horner score. It's still among the best of *Trek*: a zippy adventure, a gut-punch of a death scene and a group of people you'd like to spend more time with. All together now: "Khaaaaaan!" **ADAM SMITH**



SUPERMAN & LOIS: SEASON 2

OUT **26 SEPTEMBER** / CERT **TBC** / **634 MINS**

DVD BR

Surprisingly satisfying and timely, *Superman & Lois* is the Supershow that people are sleeping on. Big mistake. Season 2 ups the world(s)-saving ante as the threat of Ally Allston (Rya Kihlstedt) — a cult leader who seeks to merge her followers with their doppelgängers in another world — forces Clark (Tyler Hoechlin) to deal with a bizarro version of himself. But the show is often at its best when the superheroics take a backseat to the deftly handled drama. Themes of jealousy, trust and deceit are tackled with nuance as the Kents wrestle with keeping the ultimate family secret. It's a classic superhero problem that never feels stale, and the impressive ensemble add subtle layers to powerful storylines. Bring on Season 3. **AMON WARMANN**



DRIVE A CROOKED ROAD

OUT **19 SEPTEMBER** / CERT **12** / **83 MINS**

BR

"Shorty, as long as you're getting with it, you gotta get it right. That is not a good-lookin' dame. That is the atom bomb." Ace driver/mechanic Eddie Shannon (Mickey Rooney), a pint-sized loser, is suckered by sharp customers Steve Norris (Kevin McCarthy), Harold Baker (Jack Kelly) and Barbara Mathews (Dianne Foster), who flatter him with invites to boozy Malibu beach parties to sign him up as wheel man on a bank heist. One catch is that Shorty has to drive along a stretch of bad road in record time to hit the highway before road blocks go up — and another is that his new pals would rather rub him out than pay him his share. A tough, smart, suspenseful film noir with excellent getaway-driving action. **KIM NEWMAN**



THE GREAT DICTATOR

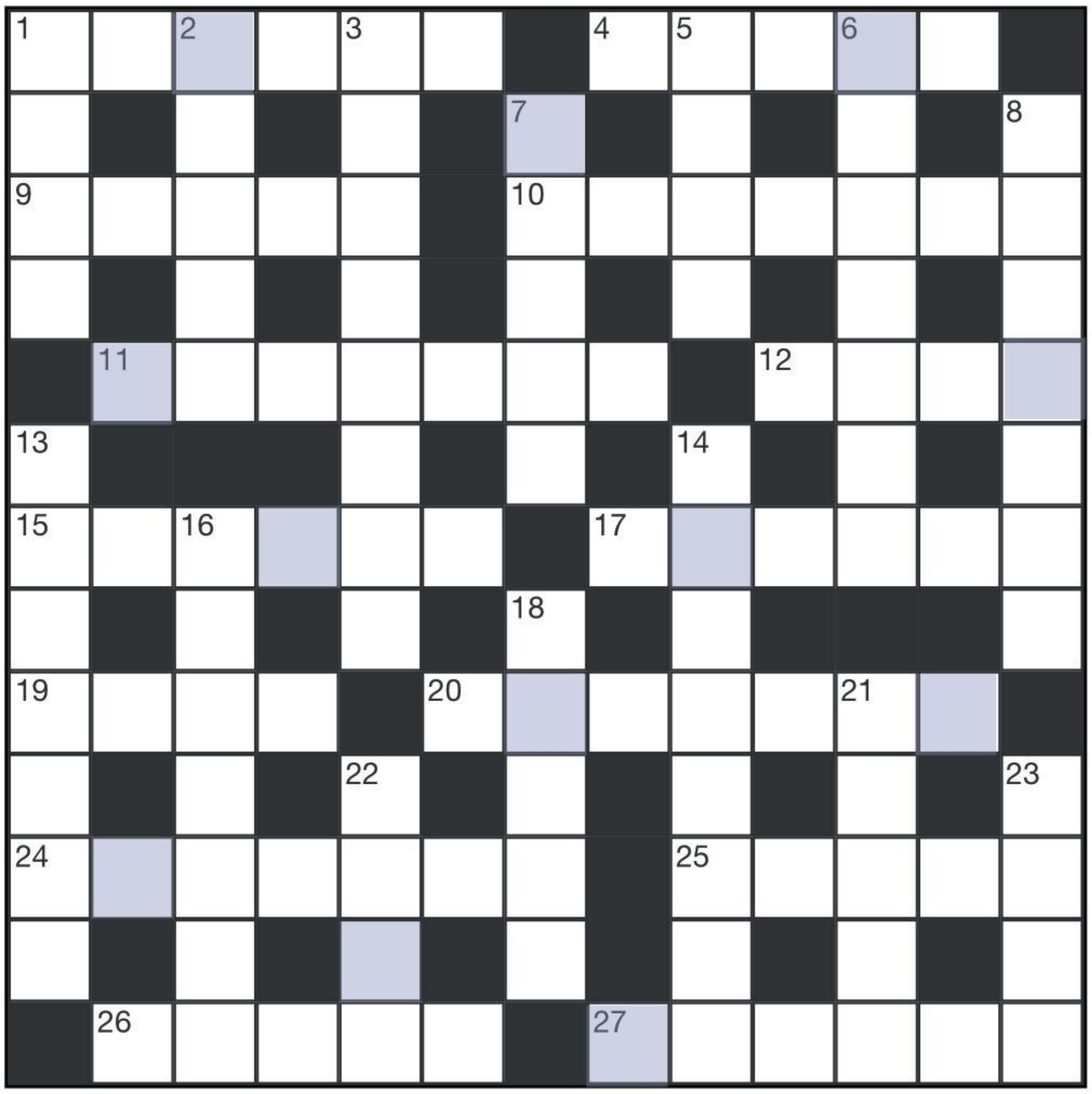
OUT **26 SEPTEMBER** / CERT **12** / **125 MINS**

BR

It would have been easy to coast; the promise of a full Charlie Chaplin talkie would have been enough to sell this satire around the world. But instead Chaplin made a masterpiece, his most profound and eloquent statement on our duty as human beings to do right by one another. He takes dual roles as a Hitler-esque dictator and a humble barber mistaken for the tyrant, to tragicomic and triumphant effect. There are moments of sublime silent comedy — the dictator's dance with a globe is hilarious and chilling — but also one of the most barnstorming speeches in film history. Chaplin was famously a liberal, always siding with the little guy against the machine (see also *Modern Times*), and this still feels relevant and powerful. **HELEN O'HARA**

Alamy

CROSSWORD AND COMPETITION



ACROSS

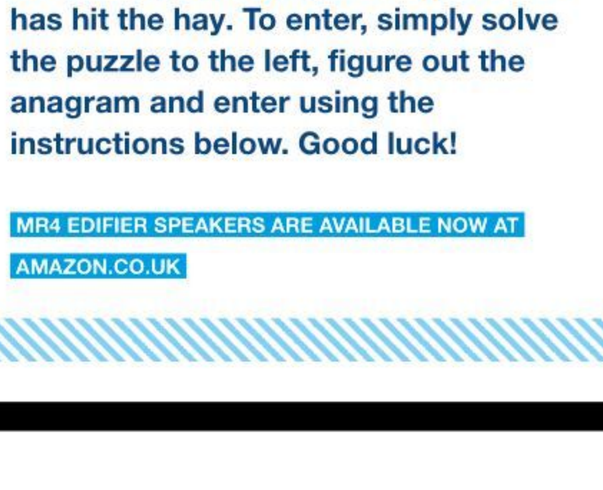
1 Jim, who was Ethan Hunt's predecessor (6)
4 State in which Leatherface lives (5)
9 *The Wild* — (Richard Burton) (5)
10 Roman disaster movie with Kit Harington (7)
11 Like the Men led by Ben Stiller or a Train directed by Jim Jarmusch (7)
12 It connects Scar, a Dev Patel film and MGM (4)
15 — *County* (Jack Black movie) (6)
17 Steven Spielberg fantasy featuring Audrey Hepburn's final big-screen role (6)
19 Could be Shelley, Nia or Justin (4)
20 Agent Starling, as played by Jodie Foster and Julianne Moore (7))
24 Genre for which John Ford is best known (7)
25/26 Across She starred in *Mulholland Drive* and Peter Jackson's *King Kong* (5,5)
27 Moreau, whose Catherine was in a love triangle with Jules and Jim (6)

DOWN

1 See 14 Down
2 Denis Villeneuve film with two Jakes? (5)
3 *The* — (Christopher Nolan film) (8)
5 Autumn de Wilde's 2020 Austen adaptation (4)
6 Where "life can be bright" in *West Side Story* (7)
7 *A Night At The* — (Marx Brothers) (5)
8 In which Harrison Ford plays Detective Book (7)
13 Brat Pack actor from *St Elmo's Fire* and *About Last Night* (3,4)
1/14 Down Star of *Midsommar* and *Don't Worry Darling* (8,4)
16 Problem shared by Leonard Shelby, Alita and Jason Bourne (7)
18 James Coburn's spy who was Our Man (5)
21 Possibly Krusty, possibly Pennywise (5)
22 The tagline calls it "an epic tale of crime and obsession" (4)
23 It's a Rob Marshall musical number (4)

WIN!

A PAIR OF EDIFIER MR4 SPEAKERS



Anyone looking to soup up their home audio experience will be wanting to crack the crossword this month, as we've got a pair of black Edifier MR4 speakers up for grabs (RRP £129). Sleek and stylish, but compact and discreet, they offer two modes — 'music' and 'monitor' — which deliver sound tailored to different scenarios, while the wooden cabinets reduce any distortion. With simple connectivity to an array of devices, there's also a headphone jack for late-night viewing if everyone else has hit the hay. To enter, simply solve the puzzle to the left, figure out the anagram and enter using the instructions below. Good luck!

MR4 EDIFIER SPEAKERS ARE AVAILABLE NOW AT AMAZON.CO.UK

COMPETITION ENDS 26 SEPTEMBER

HOW TO ENTER Take the letters from each coloured square and rearrange them to form the name of an actor, director or character. Visit www.empireonline.com/crossword and fill out the form, along with your answer, in the provided field. Entry is free and closes at midnight on 26 September. Winners are selected at random. See below for terms and conditions.

SEPTEMBER ANSWERS ACROSS: 1 Robert, **4** Bates, **9** Motel, **10** Ruffalo, **11** Mothra, **12** Naked, **14** Chief Of Police, **16** Reeve, **17** Rachel, **20** Strange, **22** Booth, **23** Twist, **24** Leiter. **DOWN: 1** Rome, **2** Batmobile, **3** Ralph, **5** Alfonso, **6** Eva, **7** Bryan Forbes, **8** Goldie, **13** Knives Out, **14** Corpse, **15** Fiennes, **18** Cable, **19** Cher, **21** Raw.

ANAGRAM RHYS IFANS

TERMS AND CONDITIONS: One entry per person. Entries are free. Entries must be received before 27 September or will not be valid. The Competition is only open to people aged 18 and over who live in the United Kingdom and are not a Bauer employee or their immediate family. One winner will be selected at random from all valid entries. Competition promoted by H Bauer Publishing t/a Empire ("Empire"). Empire's choice of winner is final, and no correspondence will be entered into in this regard. The winner will be notified, via email, between seven and ten days after the competition ends. Empire will email the winner a maximum of three times. If the winner does not respond to the message within 14 days of the competition's end, Empire will select another winner at random and the original winner will not win a prize. Empire is not responsible for late delivery or unsatisfactory quality of the prize. Entrants agree to the collection of their personal data in accordance with Empire's privacy policy: http://www.bauerdatapromise.co.uk/. Winner's personal details will be given to prize provider to arrange delivery of the prize. Bauer reserves the right to amend or cancel these terms or any aspect of the competition (including the prize) at any time if required for reasons beyond its control. Any questions, please email empire@bauermedia.co.uk. Complaints will not be considered if made more than 30 days after the competition ends. Winner's details available on request (after the competition ends) by emailing empire@bauermedia.co.uk. For full T&Cs see http://www.bauerlegal.co.uk/competition-terms.html





CLASSIC SCENE

Standout sequences from the great movies





Zodiac Chosen by JOE CARNAHAN

JOE CARNAHAN: "I was watching *Zodiac* the other night and it's just a brilliant film. It's underrated. I grew up in Northern California and I wanted that story, and I look at the movie, and there was no fucking way I could ever have made it as brilliant as Fincher made it. That scene at Berryessa Lake, where the couple's just lying there and the guy shows up and he stabs them. It's about eight shots, and it's just sublime. Not a wasted frame. We could spend three hours talking about it."

EXT. LAKE BERRYESSA — DAY

Bryan Hartnell (Patrick Scott Lewis) and Cecelia Shepard (Pell James) are being held at gunpoint by a masked man.

THE MAN: Don't get up. I want her to tie you up.

He produces two sets of rope.

BRYAN: Okay.

Cecelia walks forward, takes the rope from the man, goes back to Bryan and ties his hands behind his back.

BRYAN: [*whispering*] You know, if he comes any closer I might be able to get that gun.

THE MAN: Don't get any ideas.

BRYAN: I'm not—

THE MAN: I killed a guard escaping from prison in Montana.

BRYAN: I'm not doing anything, okay?

The man comes closer.

THE MAN: I'm not afraid to kill again. [*Pause*] Look away.

Cecelia does so. The man scurries behind her and ties her hands too.

BRYAN: What was the name of that prison? Hey, you said it was in Montana, right?

The man pushes Cecelia down on her front. He begins to hogtie her.

THE MAN: I'm taking your car and going to Mexico.

BRYAN: We didn't complain when you tied our hands. Okay, you have everything that I have. We have done everything that you've asked. [*To Cecelia, gently*] It's okay, it's okay…

The man comes behind Bryan.

THE MAN: She tied you loose, didn't she? Get on your stomach so I can tie your feet.

BRYAN: Okay. It gets really cold out here at night. We could freeze.

The man pushes him down onto the picnic blanket they were lying on just moments earlier. The man ties him more tightly.

BRYAN: Okay, you all done?

The man has retreated to the tree next to them.

BRYAN: You know, just because people are gonna ask, was that thing even loaded?

The man steps forward, takes out his gun, ejects the cartridge and shows Bryan that it was, indeed, loaded. Bryan says nothing. He turns to face Cecelia, who is on the verge of panicking.

BRYAN: It's okay. This is all gonna be okay.

Cecelia glances up at the man, and sees him pull a knife and step in towards them. Bryan looks around, but can't do anything as the man stabs him five times in the back. Cecelia screams in horror. The man moves over to Cecelia and stabs her five times, also in the back. Screaming in agony, the man then flips her onto her back and stabs her three more times. Over a wide shot of the lake, their screams fade, as the screen goes black.



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WEDDING SEASON

TILL DEATH DO THEY PART

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